

# NEBULA

MONTHLY

## SCIENCE FICTION

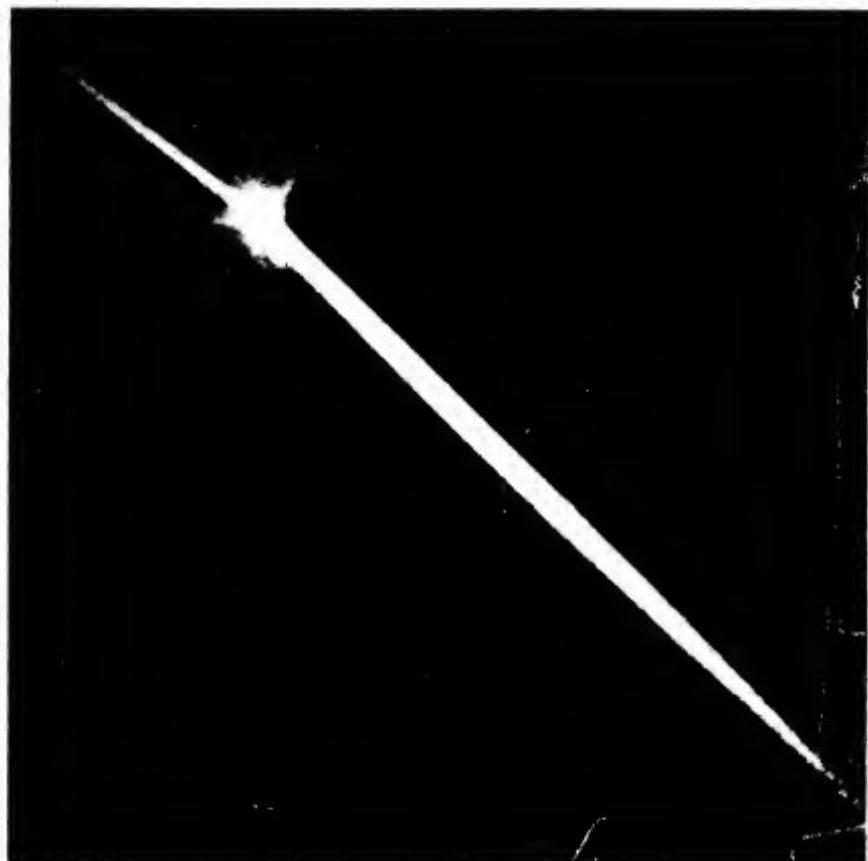
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NUMBER 31



AMERICA'S FAVOURITE SF AUTHORS

# STARDUST PATROL



*Exploding Andromedid Meteor.*  
(Photo. Science Museum, London.)

## KENNETH JOHNS

Twenty million times a day specks of dust flash into the Earth's atmosphere from space and are annihilated in bursts of energy. Even more frequently individual atoms collide with the atoms of our air and become part of its mass.

This accretion of meteors and cosmic dust drawn in from interstellar space is not solely of academic interest. Cosmic debris and meteor trails have far-reaching effects on such dissimilar items as world-wide bouts of rainfall, digging programmes in the Antarctic, and a new system of radio communication. Plus, of course, the usual quota of UFO scares.

The meteorological effect of meteors—the words tell us that meteor were at one time thought to be weather phenomena—has been demonstrated by Australian scientists. They discovered that heavy showers of rain occurred simultaneously over the whole globe, and the only explanation they can find to fit this occurrence is that of the Earth running into a meteor stream thirty

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# NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

Issue Number Thirty-One

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### **STAR AGAINST DARKNESS**

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*Out across the Galaxy they spread, engulfing a million solar systems—and then they laid their plans for Earth*

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**Front Cover by D. McKeown**

**Back Cover by Arthur Thomson**

**Black and White Illustrations by Harry Turner, Gerard Quinn and D. McKeown**

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# *Look here*

I think you will enjoy this issue of NEBULA even more than usual as, not only is each story well up to our usual standard of thought-provoking readability, all are written by authors who have earned for themselves a rather special place in the affections of the regular readers of this magazine.

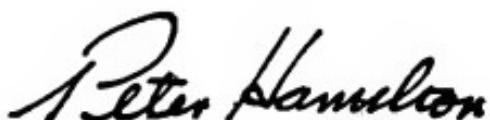
Robert Silverberg, although a native of New York, had his very first story accepted for NEBULA No. 7, dated February, 1954. Only two years later he was chosen as the most promising new American writer by the World Science-Fiction Convention and has since joined that select circle of authors who make a successful full-time profession of writing science-fiction. I am sure that when you have read "The Fires Die Down" you will appreciate why Mr. Silverberg has attained this outstanding degree of success so quickly: perhaps, as a NEBULA reader, you will also share my own personal pride in the fact that this magazine was the first in the world to recognise the potential talent of this remarkably capable young man.

Another of my discoveries is Peter J. Ridley, who distinguished himself by having his very first yarn in our very first issue almost six years ago. His appearances in our pages since then have been all too few but I am happy to report that "Wish Upon A Star" promises to be forerunner of many more unusual stories by this very original new writer.

Although Brian W. Aldiss had appeared in our magazine on one or two previous occasions it was not until we published "All The World's Tears" last year that he became one of those authors who are constantly in demand by our regular readers and correspondents. In this story he created so vivid and unusual a setting and atmosphere that it not only caused a minor sensation among NEBULA readers but was immediately chosen for inclusion in the Autumn, 1958, edition of the well known and discriminating digest, "Pick of Today's Short Stories". "Ninian's Experiences" is yet another startlingly unique short story and will, I am convinced, even further enhance the reputation of its author among science-fiction devotees.

There is little I can write about E. C. Tubb that is not already well known to you through the recent biography in our "Fanorama" series. Suffice it to say that he has written far more words for NEBULA than I have—about 250,000 of them, or enough to fill completely five issues of the magazine—and has been chosen by our readers as NEBULA Author of the Year four times out of five. After a short absence of his name from our Contents Page last year, he is once again bombarding me with great new yarns which will doubtless provide us with first-rate reading entertainment for many months to come.

Last, but by no means least, comes William F. Temple who has for some years been generally accepted as one of Britain's most erudite and accomplished science-fiction authors. While he has not filled quite so many of our pages as Mr. Tubb he has been a regular contributor to the magazine since its earliest days, and quite recently this happy co-operation culminated in his selection by our readers as 1957 NEBULA Author of the Year. His story, "War Against Darkness", although complete in itself, is the second in a brand-new series of novels specially written for the magazine, and both Mr. Temple and I eagerly look forward to your comments on it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Hamilton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Peter" on top and "Hamilton" on the bottom, slightly overlapping.

# The Fires Die Down

*Every so often history can repeat itself exactly—  
but only if one is ignorant of what has gone before*

*Illustrated by Gerard Quinn*

The Thanian colonising vessel had covered nearly five hundred cubic light-years and had visited sixteen potential colony-worlds without success, before they found the green planet of the yellow sun. It was a small world and one located far from the main currents of galactic affairs, but by this time Commander Dorchan Ledru hardly cared about that. All that mattered was that the world was livable for Thanians.

Commander Ledru was anxious to drop off his cargo of colonists and get going back to Thane for the next batch. He was a career spaceman, who in his seventeen years on board the colonising vessel *Dark Star* had seen the shores of half a thousand worlds and had aided in the planting of nearly ninety Thanian colonies. He was a short, compactly-built man, with the lustrous bluish-purple skin of a Thanian of the highest caste.

In Commander Ledru burned what he regarded as a sacred fire: the compulsion to travel from world to world, aiding to the best of

his abilities the spread of Thanian civilisation through the galaxies.

And now another planetfall loomed. Ledru buzzed at his control-panel and said: "Let me have the specs on this planet coming up."

Moments later the sheaf of papers cascaded from the slot in the wall. Ledru's nimble nine-fingered hands scooped them up and shuffled them into a neat stack. He skimmed through the reports.

The couple reading indicated livable temperature. Spectroscopic analysis showed an atmosphere composed four-fifths of nitrogen and one-fifth of oxygen, with a sprinkling of miscellaneous inert gases and other things like carbon dioxide. Not bad, Ledru thought. The planet's livability profile coincided with the standard curve to a similarity of .903. Well within the margin of tolerance, he thought, nodding over the reports.

Gravity at surface was 1.01 Thane-norm; acceptable enough! He studied the tridim photos of the world: a green planet, well-forested, with capacious seas of oxidised hydrogen. It was the third planet of a system of nine. It was orbited by a solitary giant moon. There was no sign of intelligent life—though, since the photo had been made from more than a hundred planetary diameters away, this could not be held as a certainty.

But it looked like a good planet. Ledru smiled and tugged thoughtfully at the dangling wattles that fell in folds from the flesh of his throat. He felt the old excitement rising again, the thrill of bringing Thanian life to yet another world.

From planet to planet in a chain across the galaxy, like flaming jewels in some infinitely costly necklace, stretched Thanian life. It was a supreme function of life to carry itself to other worlds, Ledru thought. Which was why the Thanians were the galaxy's highest form of intelligent life.

He jabbed down on a communicator button that opened a ship-wide circuit. The forty members of his crew and the four hundred colonists carried as cargo listened as Commander Ledru said: "This is the place. Prepare for landing at once."

The *Dark Star* hummed gently as it swung into the series of inward spirals that comprised a planetary landing orbit. Commander Ledru watched with growing pleasure as the proposed colony-world grew nearer at each swing. Thick forests became visible; choppy seas, broad and void of traffic. It was incredible, Ledru thought, finding a gem of a world like this and finding it uninhabited!

It was incredible—and too good to be true. The planet was inhabited, as the Thanians were to discover not long after landing.



The *Dark Star* stood upright in a clearing in the forest, a gleaming chrome-jacketed spear nearly a thousand feet high. Giant supporting buttresses propped it on four sides like arching, naked legs.

The robot atmospheric-samplers went out first, of course. Over the screens Ledru watched the glittering little things squirrelling over the grass of the new-found world, soaking in the atmosphere and sunlight and telemetering their findings back to the master control brain on F Deck of the *Dark Star*. He waited; and in time came the report from the computer, confirming the data obtained while the ship still had been in space.

The planet was livable.

Ledru smiled warmly. There was no joy greater than the one of finding a suitable planet, and extending the dominion of Thane.

His hand tightened on the communicator control lever, and his words rang out through the entire length of the great ship:

"The planet is acceptable. Disembark, using Landing Procedure A."

His private phone rang, and he snatched it up.

"Yes?"

"Commander, this is Huchaq, from the scanning tower. News, sir."

"Go on, out with it!"

"We have visitors, sir. I've picked them up on the lens very clearly. They're humanoids, and they're coming through the forest toward the ship."

Commander Ledru ran a finger thoughtfully over his lipless face and sighed. Too good to be true! The planet was inhabited!

"Very well," he said.

He broke contact with the scanning tower in the nose of the ship, now the uppermost point of the tail-standing vessel, and unhappily restored the ship-wide communicator circuit.

"Attention, all hands. Intelligent humanoids have been sighted approaching the ship. The previous order is temporarily suspended. Remain aboard ship until further instructions. All officers report to bridge at once, repeat *at once*."

The procedure for colonising worlds which already happened to be inhabited by some form of relatively intelligent life was laid down in the Manual of Operations carried on board every colonising vessel. There were no deviations from this policy, which had been established in the earliest days of Thanian expansion into space.

If the inhabitants of a planet were utterly primitive, pre-technological, unorganised and uncivilised, they could safely be ignored by the colonial mission. The natives in such a case would be apt to regard the Thanian visitors as god-like beings, and would in all likelihood not interfere with the development of the colony. Naturally, by the time two or three generations had passed and the colony was firmly entrenched, it would make no difference how the natives felt about the intruders in their midst.

If, on the other hand, a planet were highly civilised, with a technological culture, a population of many millions or even some billions, atomic power, interplanetary travel—in such a case, large-scale colonisation was obviously impossible. It would involve fighting a fierce war with the natives of the planet, and that was both barbaric and overly expensive.

Instead, in such a case, the colonising officer had instructions to initiate a diplomatic liaison with the planet, establishing a Thanian embassy on it and working toward some sort of economic alliance. It was the best outcome that could be hoped for; if colonisation were impossible, an alliance was almost as desirable.

It was in the intermediate instances—such as this one—that trouble arose. On a world with some degree of civilisation, but with relatively low population density and no great degree of technological advancement, it was impossible simply to establish a colony without a by-your-leave and unthinkable to turn away rebuffed.

Rather, the colonising officer was required by Thanian policy to attempt to achieve a diplomatic rapport, gaining permission from the natives for the Thanians to settle on their world. Failing this, the colonists were simply to crush the natives by force of arms and establish a settlement anyway. This was to be avoided, if at all possible—but under no circumstances was a commander to turn back from a fertile, desirable, and thinly-peopled planet even if the natives objected.

And, Ledru thought, that was the position here. This world fell in the intermediate class. It was populated—obviously. But there was no great degree of technological advancement here, nor any exceptional density of population either. That was obvious also, because no cities had been visible from above during the landing. Such natives as this planet had were still in the village stage, evidently.

Ledru waited until the members of his staff had gathered. There were eight men who by the code had to take part in first contact with an alien race: the Commander, the ship's anthropological officer, the lingual-translator technician, the ship's historian-recorder, the elected representative of the colonist-passengers, the representative of the crewmen, and two "observers" chosen at random from crew and passengers.

Ledru felt tense as he and his party, resplendent in their uniforms, rode down the interior elevator to ground-level, near the tail of the big ship. They paused just before going through the lock. A telescreen mounted to the side of the hatch revealed four alien figures waiting at the edge of the clearing for them.

Nineteen times in the five hundred-year history of the Thanian galactic expansion movement, a ship's commander had fallen martyr to alien beings in just this sort of first contact. Ledru tried to mask his uneasiness as the shining walls of the ship parted to allow the eight Thanians to step through. He had no desire to join his nineteen late colleagues in the ranks of the glorious martyrs.

Uncertainly the eight Thanians moved forward to meet the alien delegation. Ledru, of course, led the way; immediately behind him came Technician Chai and Colonist Zhuul, together bearing the burden of the cumbersome electronic lingual translator. The air,

Ledru thought, was particularly stimulating to the nostrils—sweet and fresh, almost like new golden wine. Blue sky was dappled by fleecy white clouds. He had rarely seen a more beautiful world, with its green-topped hills rising gently in the distance and its air and sky and the pleasing yellow hue of its sun.

Inwardly he resolved that he would go to any extreme at all to secure this world for Thane. No matter if he had to root out every last one of the alien beings and personally slit his throat; this was a world of worlds, a miniature gem of a planet!

The aliens were waiting. Four of them, tall, thin, pale-skinned beings. As Ledru covered the ground that separated them from him, he sized them up. They were all a good head taller than he was, but they lacked his compact muscularity. Their bodies were lean and loose-jointed; they were the bodies of speedy runners, not of tough close-quarters fighters.

The aliens followed the standard humanoid life-format: they stood upright on two legs, with arms depending from their shoulders. They had no throat-wattles, and their four-fingered, single-thumbed hands looked absurdly malformed.

"Activate the translator," Ledru murmured to Technician Chai. The Technician swiftly threw three switches and a humming sound was audible.

Ledru said: "We come from beyond the skies, from the world known as Thane. We give you greetings."

There was a pause, while the translator reconverted Ledru's statement into abstract thought-patterns and repeated them in presumably understandable terms to the aliens. Ledru watched, hawk-eyed. The aliens did not seem to be armed in any way. They wore only loose, somewhat skimpy robes. Their obscenely ugly five-toed feet were left bare, a sight which Ledru could have done without.

When the translator had finished, the tallest of the four aliens said, widening his lips in what Ledru took to be a smile: "Put your machine away, Commander. We understand your language. Welcome to Earth."

Ledru was taken aback. The words had come direct from the alien's broad lips, without the aid of the machine! He had spoken Thanian!

"How it is you speak the Tongue?"

The alien shrugged, saying: "It is an attribute of ours, Commander. My name is Smit. My companions are Lee, Theron, and Dun."

"I am—Commander Dorchan Ledru of Imperial Thane. My

ship is the *Dark Star*." Ledru felt acute discomfort in talking to these—these Earthmen. He had never had the experience of conversing with alien beings in his own language before, and it was frighteningly unsettling to do so now. He sensed his fellow Thanians stirring uneasily behind him.

Smit said: "Our village is not far from here. We saw your ship land and thought we would come to welcome you to Earth. It's been a long time since a ship landed on this planet."

Ledru blinked away sudden vertigo. "You've—had other spaceships land here, Smit?"

"Of course! Not recently—not in, oh, ten thousand years or so. But we've had ships here before." He nudged one of his companions. "Eh, Theren? Haven't we had ships, now?"

The four Earthmen chuckled amiably.

Ledru felt inner churning of dismay. *Ten thousand years?* *Ten thousand!*

Ten thousand years ago the Empire of Grand Thane was utterly undreamed-of. Thane was an isolated planet in an isolated star-cluster; ten thousand years ago it had still been divided into planetary factions, speaking different languages and embracing different creeds. Why, Thane had had the interplanetary drive only seven thousand years, the interstellar only fifteen hundred! The whole Thanian drive toward interstellar colonisation was barely five hundred years old!

And these people talked of spaceship landings ten thousand years ago? It was a shattering notion. A race older than the Thanians, one that had reached interstellar travel so long ago——

It was impossible.

*They're lying*, Ledru told himself. Where are their cities, then, and their colonies in space? We have never seen this pale-skinned five-fingered race before. They're still planet-bound. They're lying to us.

He felt dismay give way to anger and contempt. He said: "I may as well tell you frankly why we're here. We have come to establish a planetary settlement on this world. We're willing to negotiate peacefully."

Something twinkled in the Earthman's eye. Ledru felt short and stubby, woefully inferior, as he stared up at the tall, thin being who smiled playfully at him. The Earthman said: "Of course you come to colonise. And why not? We have plenty of room."

Ledru felt fresh surprise. "You have no objections to our settling here?"

The Earthman shrugged. "I cannot speak for all my people. But I see no reason why not. Earth has room for more than it holds now, after all."

Ledru nodded tightly. "I see. Well, can you take me to whoever's in charge?"

"In charge?"

"Yes. The President, the Autarch, the Governor-General. The ruling council, if you have one. We'd like to make formal application to the Earth Government to build our colony here."

The Earthman's dark eyes widened slightly, and then he laughed, a pleasant deep laugh. "Earth Government? Why, why should we have one of those? We're free men, Commander Ledru."

"There's no government at all?"

"Naturally not."

Ledru frowned, thinking, *That places this planet in the category of a pre-civilisation culture. Legally we can begin the colony right away, without bothering with the formality of haggling for it. But—*

It was hard to think of these people as being in the pre-civilisation category. They were too self-assured, too easily confident, to be mere primitives.

And there was the matter of their knowing how to speak Thanian, Ledru thought worriedly.

*Is there such a thing, he asked himself, as a post-civilisation culture?*

The Earthman said, "We shall go now. If you wish to visit our village, we'll be happy to escort you there tomorrow."

"Of course. Yes, we'd love to see it."

"We will return in the morning." The Earthmen were smiling. One moment they stood before the party of Thanians; the next, they were gone, winked out like four snuffed flames.

Ledru passed a hand over his eyes. "They're gone," he muttered. "Poof! Just like that!"

"What do you make of this, Commander?" one of his men asked him.

Ledru turned. "You heard what they said. There's no government here, and hence we can begin setting up the colony right away."

"But—"

"No," Ledru snapped. "I don't want to discuss the situation. Let me alone."

Since there seemed to be no reason to the contrary, Ledru ordered an immediate inauguration of work on the building of the colony.

The trained specialists who made up his permanent staff took their places, aiding the eager but unskilled colonists in making the clearings, trimming the felled trees, and in establishing the first rough outlines of the colony.

Work proceeded through the afternoon and along into nightfall, when there was a definite chill in the air. Although it would have been a simple matter to rig the ship's floodlights, Ledru had learned from experience that too much work on the first day was unwise, and so as soon as the lovely golden sun had dipped beneath the horizon he ordered a cessation of work. The colonists trooped back into the ship for their evening meal and their night's recreation, and darkness, broken only by the glimmering of the large moon, descended to cover the handiwork of the day.

Morning came, and with it came more Earthmen. Shortly after dawn they began to gather, appearing, it seemed, from nowhere, and standing quietly to one side to watch the proceedings. A few of the bubble-houses were beginning to go up now. The colony was taking shape rapidly. A racial characteristic of the Thanians was their formidable, unstoppable energy.

Ledru, supervising, recognised the Earthman Smit and hailed him.

The Earthman said, "You work fast. The colony is rising well."

Ledru nodded. "We have the excitement of growth in us. It doubles the strength of our muscles."

"I understand the sensation. We of Earth had it once too. Once."

The Thanian turned and stared upward into the Earthman's unreadable eyes. "What do you mean, had it *once*? I don't understand you people."

"Would you like to visit our village now?"

Ledru said, "Right now? In the middle of work?"

"We can be there in a moment, and back again almost as fast. Come: give me your hand?"

"My hand? Why?"

"It speeds the trip."

Unresisting, Ledru slipped his blue hand into the Earthman's pink one. He felt the sudden tenseness of the Earthman's grasp; then dizziness swirled around him and he felt himself falling——

The sensation ceased almost at once. Ledru was steady again; Smit stood a few feet away, smiling, and nearby were three or four Earthpeople Ledru had not seen before, including two that seemed

to be females. They all stared at him with the same frank, open curiosity.

Behind them, Ledru saw several huts—simple things made of some pale plastic, looking hardly more complex than the rudimentary shelters his colonists were erecting.

"Where are we?" he demanded. "And how did I get here? Answer me."

Smit grinned. "This is my village. You got here by instantaneous transport, of course."

"What? But—"

"It was a surprise to me to learn that your people are incapable of it," Smit said. "My village is half a planetary radius away from your colony."

Ledru performed a quick computation and gasped. "But—thousands of miles!"

"Yes!"

Ledru tugged at his wattles. He turned slowly, looking around. He saw other huts in the distance, well-spaced, with greenness all about. Then, with shock, he recognised a familiar object: a spaceship towering heavenward no more than a thousand meters away. At this distance he could see that the ship, though plainly recognisable as to function, was of totally alien design. It had no buttresses, for one thing, though its landing-fins served the same stabilising purpose. And the metal skin of the ship was pitted and corroded by the oxidisation of centuries—millennia, perhaps.

"That ship—why is it here?"

"A monument," Smit said sombrely. "It's the last spaceship ever manned by Earthpeople. It's been standing here for ten thousand years."

"I don't understand," Ledru said. Somehow, next to these people he felt hopelessly primitive and crude, and the feeling irked him. His sweat-glands were discharging with embarrassing self-will. "Did Earth once have the interstellar drive?"

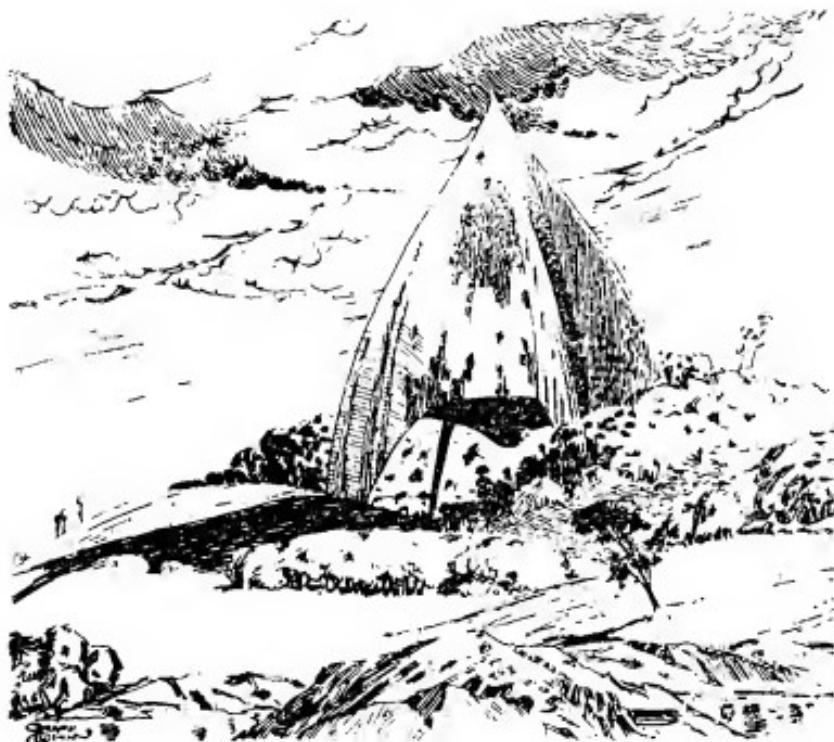
"Of course," Smit said. "Long ago. Earth once had colonies on a thousand worlds, Commander."

Ledru shook his head stubbornly. "That can't be. I've visited nearly that many planets myself. Seen all sorts of humanoid life, but nothing that could be remotely traced to you people."

Sadly Smit said, "Our colonies died away, Commander. As yours will."

Ledru looked up, eyes smarting. "What did you say?"

"Your colonies will die away."



Ledru stared at the big ship and saw the jungle vines crawling over its fins like hungry serpents. "Never," he said doggedly. "We haven't even begun to expand yet. By the time we're finished, there'll be Thanians throughout the galaxy."

"As once there were Earthmen," Smit said.

Ledru was silent, uncomprehending. The Earthman said mildly, "It was three hundred thousand years ago that we first voyaged into interstellar space, Commander. We plunged outward as if goaded by a raging flame behind us. Earth colonies sprung up on hundreds of planets; our empire spangled the skies."

"No," Ledru said. "It couldn't have been that way. There was no sign—"

"Our expansion cycle was finished within a hundred thousand years," Smit went on. "At that time you of Thane were gibbering in the forests. Our empire began to shrink. Birthrates fell. Homesick, Earthmen returned to the mother world. It was slow, so slow no one realised it was taking place. The tide ebbed. Before long we had fifty worlds instead of a thousand; then five, then three. Then one. Earth."

In a quivering voice Ledru said, "How many are you now?"

"We number one hundred thousand," Smit said. "This is why there is room for you on Earth. Once thirty billion of us lived here."

There was something convincing about the Earthman's story, Ledru admitted. But he found it hard to accept the bland statement that an empire of a thousand suns had shrunk to a mere hundred thousand amiable farmers living on a single green world.

He said, "A thousand colonies gone?"

"Yes."

He felt burning contempt for these mild-mannered Earthmen suddenly. A thousand worlds had slipped through their grasp. What fumbling weaklings they must be!

He said, "It must have been a tragedy, the loss of your empire."

Smit smiled—a patronising smile? Ledru wondered. "Tragedy? Hardly. We saw it as the inevitable turning of the great wheel, the coming round of the cycle. And we are far from unhappy now. We communicate by telepathy; we travel instantaneously where we wish. We have love and amusement and all the food we need. What more can a civilised person desire?"

"But—" Ledru was spluttering now. "But—what about glory, and the stars, and—how can you be content to remain on this little world and—"

Again the smile. "You forget: we left our little world once. We ventured forth and did the things your race is now doing, and the glory and the stars were ours. We have lost interest in these things—as, in time, you will do."

"Wrong!" Ledru shouted. "We're made of stronger stuff than you dreamers. Just because *your* race failed, just because *your* empire died—"

"There was a race before us," Smit remarked. "They came out of Rigel when we of Earth were jungle apes, and they colonised the stars too. And they died away, as we did. Our explorers found them, five thousand of them, dreaming quietly of the glories that had been theirs. And we pitied them, in their decline. Now our turn has come. And some day it will be yours."

"Never! Never!" Ledru felt like beating his clenched fists against the bodies of these smug Earthmen. "Our empire will outlast the stars themselves!"

"The stars die," Smit said quietly. "Their fires die down. And it is the same way with stellar empires. The Rigelians had their day, and twilight came for them. Now it is we who live in the shadow of yesterday. And some day, not too soon—"

"Never!"

"The fires die down, Ledru."

The Thanian shook his head fiercely. "I've had about enough of this. Take me back to my ship!"

"Certainly." Smit reached out a hand to take his.

There was the moment of vertigo, and then the familiar bulk of the *Dark Star* loomed before him, and all around the busy colonists laboured to build this latest of Thane's worlds. Ledru glared at the Earthman angrily. "Keep away from my people, hear? Maybe your bunch failed, but we won't. I don't want you depressing them with your gloomy stories of a future that doesn't concern us."

"As you wish," Smit said. He smiled one last time, and then he was gone.

Ledru muttered a curse in the general direction of the place where the Earthman had been standing. Then, laughing at himself for having let himself get so disturbed over a trifle, he cupped his hands and shouted, "Hurry up, there! Let's get this place built!"

They hurried. Ledru felt the old impatience reasserting itself. He wanted to get back to Thane and pick up the next load of colonists and transport them to their new world. Faster, faster, as Thane spread out over the galaxy. He blotted the fate of the Earthmen from his mind. There was too much work to be done.

Impatient, he grabbed a shovel himself and helped out. He worked like a demon all the long sunny afternoon, concerned only with getting this colony built so he could get on about his business, unmindful of the shadowed destiny that awaited his race three hundred thousand years hence.

ROBERT SILVERBERG

## BACK NUMBERS .

*In response to requests from a large number of readers we are again offering back numbers of NEBULA for those who are unable to obtain them from their usual supplier.*

*All issues from No. 11 to No. 30 can be had for 2/- or 35c. each post free. All other numbers are permanently sold out.*

*Cash with order, please, to : NEBULA Science-Fiction,  
159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.*

# Ninian's Experiences

*It was a completely new art form, built of the mental emanations from the human mind and the experiences of its creator*

It was not really seeing, but let's say I saw the girl come into Ninian's shop. I received the various radiations from her, which built into the equivalent of those colour, shape, texture, proportion impressions that constitute human seeing. I knew she could be no older than nineteen; I knew she was beautiful; I knew she was bored, that the name NINIAN over the entry meant nothing to her, that she had come in to escape the heat of mid-day.

I was behind the curtain in my humus bed; she could not see me. Instead, she stared at Ninian's models. She was still bored and only very faintly curious.

The shop was small, decorous, coyly lit, with the models spaced at intervals in their beds round the display table. Unactivated, the models looked dowdy, clayey things.

Ninian's assistant, Wrybaker, came forward and began speaking politely to the girl.

"Can I activate any of the models for you, madam?" he enquired. "Their real qualities don't emerge at all in their present suspended state."

"I see," she said, sounding bewildered. "Well, that—is it a buttercup?—could I see that one activated?"

"Certainly," Wrybaker said. I heard him—well, sensed him

to be precise—bring his little psi-tuner from his pocket, switch it on, tune it to the model's frequency. A high note sank to a growl and died as he did so. The rough, grey model of the buttercup seemed to stir.

For me, there was no change in the model in any way. For the girl, I knew, the model was now becoming more vivid. It would be growing, glowing, moving, turning into a vital thing. Her mind would be full of it, as it revealed itself to be the inner quality of a buttercup, the very essence of a buttercup. She would savour the pappy, brittle greenness of it, the banal goldenness of its petals; she would realise—perhaps for the first time—the nature of its springing gesture between light and gravity. She would know, in short, what it was like to be a buttercup, to live a buttercup existence.

The girl stood there in that rather silly transfixed attitude customers fall into when first confronted by one of Ninian's models. After a minute, Wrybaker switched off. The thing in the humus bed became once more a stodgy twist of clay-like substance. The girl relaxed.

She blushed slightly and brushed an imaginary wisp of hair from her face. It was a gesture I should see her employing more than once.

"How very strange!" she exclaimed. Her voice sounded clear and refreshed. "Can you tell me—of what is this buttercup made?"

"It's not a buttercup," Wrybaker corrected deferentially, "so much as the *experience of a buttercup*. All our models are not the things themselves but the experiences of those things, if you follow me. Mr. Ninian's experiences, of course. He makes all the models personally. They are built out of the way he feels about things."

I saw—felt—sensed—her standing there with a little temptation entering her mind, colouring it, giving it that extra octave of interest. She was usually not a very intelligent girl. Her body was warm from the heat outside, nestling in her light clothes, making her feel content and unadventurous. But new ideas floated before her, and their call could not be resisted. It was as if a window opened on the sea; she was compelled to lean out.

"Perhaps I might see some other models," she said, adding casually, "and perhaps I might see Mr. Ninian."

"That will not be possible, I'm afraid," Wrybaker said. "Mr. Ninian is a very retiring man who——"

At that moment his audible vibrations were blotted out to me. One of my limitations is that I can only receive from one focal point

at a time, and just then a new focus appeared behind me. Ninian had arrived from the workshop.

He came through the room at the back of the shop without looking at me, wiping his hands on a white cloth, blinking. Because of the heat, he wore only a towel knotted round his waist and woven slippers on his feet. He was dark, twenty-six, rather short, thin; his face was heavy as an old sail, his eyes were like smoke. Walking past me, he peered through the curtain into the shop.

"I should greatly like to meet him," the girl was saying to Wrybaker. "He is so obviously—well, the expression has frequently been misused, but one can only say he is a great artist. I mean, this buttercup—this *experience* of a buttercup . . ."

Her cheeks surprised her by colouring suddenly.

Ninian saw her through the curtain. He began immediately to sweat. I had seen this reaction before in him; he was nervous and maladjusted, a state of affairs inseparable from what he did; he was an outcast. So the sweat perhaps represented a conflict between hope and experience.

Something else happened to him. Perhaps it would only have been apparent to a very perceptive human, although to me it was clear enough. He tensed. His body became more compact and alive, as if it had suddenly found a motive for being a body. His mouth readjusted itself, and by so doing changed entirely the expression of his face, rendering it more alert. He withdrew his eye from the curtain, standing quite motionless for ten seconds.

This is the change that comes over a man when he sees a woman he desires, and begins at once to plan and plan to possess her. Whenever I observe it, it frightens me.

Going to the wall, Ninian pressed a button. A bell twanged in the shop. Wrybaker excused himself politely and came into the rear room; he smiled questioningly at Ninian.

"Oh, Wrybaker," Ninian said, twisting his hands in the white cloth, "have you someone out there who wishes to see me?" '

Wrybaker understood. At such times, human beings can be amazingly quick in comprehending. Wrybaker was neither quick nor intelligent, but he could read the look on Ninian's face. (I wondered, frustratedly, what that face must look like to *eyes*.)

"She is a Miss Rowena Church," he said. "Shall I show her in here? Do you wish her to come in here?"

"Yes, please. Do you think she'll come, Wrybaker? I mean, is the place tidy? Tell her I won't be a moment. Give me time to

change. Don't let her go away, will you? Does she like the models, really like them?"

He was as nervous as a bird. Hardly listening to his assistant's reassurances, he twisted round the nondescript room, attempting to tidy it, flicking his white cloth into dusty corners, kicking an old carton under the sofa. Then he whisked over to the recess in which I stood.

"I don't think she ought to see *you*, sweetheart; at least, not until we all know each other better," he said, and he pulled down the blind that concealed me from the eyes of the world.

Almost before he had left the room, hurrying through the back door, Rowena Church came through the curtains. She too was nervous, but she had herself under control. A certain natural female poise helped her. She sat down, looking without understanding at the few pieces of electrical equipment stored here. After a minute, she stood up again. Again she adjusted the imaginary wisp of hair. Under her dress, except for two narrow belts of whiteness on her body, her skin was brown; she had been lazing frequently in the summer sun.

When Ninian came back and introduced himself, he had flung on a blue shirt and matching blue slacks. He was still sweating. Rowena was immediately affected by his shyness; in a minute however, when they began impersonally to discuss the models, they both became more natural.

"I only tried your buttercup," she was saying, "but I was immensely moved by it. Wonderful, really wonderful! It was like nothing I ever experienced before. I just felt I had to—well, come and tell you how I felt."

"And how *did* you feel? What I mean is, can you put your feeling into words?" He never took his eager eyes off her.

She looked puzzled, then she said, "I felt that—that in the circumstances to be a buttercup at all was a very wonderful achievement, but that because all the circumstances were so many and so big, it really was a terribly insignificant thing to be. With the sky and the sun and the soil and the earth and the other growing things all pressing in, the buttercup had no choice, no room for choice. It was sad in a way. Does that make sense?"

He laughed excitedly.

"Do you realise I could make a model of your experience of my experience of a buttercup—and it would then be a different model from the one you saw?" he said eagerly, smiling.

"I can't see how they—the models—work," she said confusedly.

"It really is a new art form," he said, "but it is quite simple. And you get full instructions with every model you buy. They're easy to operate."

"Oh yes, of course, I wasn't trying to pry out any free information——"

"I know," he said, "I know you weren't."

He jumped up anxiously, sorry to see the rebuffed look on her face. He waved his hands as she too stood up, trying to explain what she had meant.

"I fully intend to buy the buttercup," Rowena said. "Your experience of the buttercup, I mean."

"But you have not seen the other models. I am completing a new one now, a beauty. You ought to look at that! I have an idea! Will you—you wouldn't like, I suppose, to come round here and see it after the shop is closed? Say at eight o'clock this evening?"

The warmth was coming up in him, flooding him, flooding his cheeks.

"What is the model of?" she asked.

"It's my experience of a bonfire."

"Thank you; thank you very much. I'd love to come."

"Say eight o'clock," he repeated. She was hooked.

It was twenty minutes past eight. Outside the shop, heat still slumbered even in the long troughs of shadow across the street. Inside, the bonfire burned.

For a long while it seemed to burn in their minds as Ninian and Rowena stood there watching it. I grew tired of it before they did. At last Ninian reached forward and switched the psi-tuner off, releasing the spell. The smoke which had seemed to fill the room died, the fire itself turned into a big dollop of brownish, spiky stuff like clay, resting prosaically on its humus base.

"Wonderful!" Rowena said. She and Ninian were touching, and she did not move away. "I felt I knew all about fire. It was most extraordinary."

"I'm going to do a series of models about flame experiences. I started with a simple candle; it turned out surprisingly like the buttercup."

"But the bonfire," she said, anxious not to be diverted from her appreciation. "This was a wonderful, special bonfire. I felt I knew all about it. It was a spring bonfire, burning in a big apple orchard. It was composed entirely of pruned twigs and sticks, and as they burnt they popped, whistled and sang like a thicket full of

birds; because although they had been cut off in the winter, they would not recognise that they were dead; the sap was rising in them still, and so they sang. That part was rather pathetic, but oh, it was beautifully done, Ninian."

A sudden silence fell between them.

"It's pleasing to hear you use my name," he said awkwardly.

"It's an unusual one," she said, because she could suddenly think of nothing else to say. "Isn't it?"

"Celtic," he said, before he too was struck dumb.

Hidden in my recess, I pitied him. Chiefly I pitied him because he could never be what he wanted to be and because, unhappy and introspective fellow, he was far more lovable than the smooth-tongued seducers he attempted to imitate. But I also pitied him because anyone who sees into a human must find a hundred things to pity.

Now he blundered into a description of how his models worked, talking rapidly to hide his self-consciousness.

"You've probably heard how they're synthesising new complex molecules all the while," he said. "Some of them, like the plastics bunch, start up whole new industries almost overnight; others aren't as successful as expected. The material I model in is composed of one of the unsuccessful ones, a substance called Cathus 12. It is unstable and is no longer manufactured; I have enough of it in cold storage to last my lifetime—tons of it. I got it cheap."

"I can record anything I like in Cathus 12. It takes thought impressions like a gramophone record taking sound impressions. This simple little psi-tuner, which is not much more than an amplifying circuit, directs the thoughts. With the buttercup, for instance, I simply look at it with the tuner tuned to its frequency, and knead the Cathus as I concentrate. What gets into the Cathus, of course, is my interpretation of the buttercup."

"At one time I used to sculpt," Rowena said, bringing out the proud confession with downcast head. "I can't say how much I envy you. It wouldn't work for anyone else, would it, this process you say is so easy? I mean, you must have special mental powers, mustn't you?"

He smiled with a sort of shy pride.

"It's a kind of gift to make up for all my other deficiencies. Working in anything but Cathus 12, I can't get a likeness. I'm hopeless in ordinary clay. The only drawback with Cathus is that the stuff is not stable; it is inert until I've modelled it, and then it has a life of about five years, I'd say at most."

"Depending on how often you tune in to it?"

"That makes no difference. It has a fixed rate of decay, like a radio-active material."

"Well, I think it's all wonderful," she said vaguely.

She stood up after a minute's silence, smiling and saying formally, "It's been awfully good of you to tell me all this. I've taken up too much of your time; I really think I ought to go now, because—"

Ninian stood up too. With sudden nervous bravado, he went over and kissed her on the lips.

After that evening, Rowena Church came frequently to Ninian's back room. Apart from Wrybaker and one or two tradesmen, she was the only person Ninian ever spoke to. Some days he even hid from Wrybaker.

Not surprisingly, he began to spend more time with me, when Rowena was not there. He would stand peering at me as if I were his reflection, which in a sense I was.

"It's going to work," he said to me. "I think I've done the trick! She's artistic, you see. Rowena's artistic. She sees a part of me that nobody else would, the real me. She's better than Lettice, or Joy, or Queenie was, because she understands me."

It is beyond me to describe how these words affected me. I could not, of course, feel melancholy or any other emotion of my own, but still I was hurt to hear him dismiss the other three girls with whom he had been intimate. He was abandoning everything for Rowena; he had stopped making models. I too had become merely part of the lumber of his dismal past, something to which he was attached still, but more by circumstance than sentiment. And this was painful for me, for I could hold nothing but love for him.

His terrible shyness prevented him from pursuing Rowena as fast as he secretly desired. She came to see him on most evenings, timid herself, but determined. As they grew to know one another better, these meetings became quarrelsome.

"Your chief failing is that you won't see there are other points of view than your own!" Rowena exclaimed one evening when they were discussing art. Willy-nilly, I had to listen.

"Of course I can see there are other points of view; the trouble is, they are idiotic as far as I'm concerned."

"If you mean *my* point of view is idiotic, it would be straighter to say so."

And unfortunately Rowena's point of view was idiotic. The

snag, as Ninian had said, was that Rowena was artistic. That is to say, she was not an artist: she knew a certain amount about art and no more. Her attempts at sculpture had been failures; she could see that but for Cathus 12, Ninian's models would be failures too. Her frustrated desires—and Rowena's desires were only artistic—impelled her to try and direct what Ninian was doing into the channels of which she approved.

Ninian sensed and resented this; he did not want an art mistress. Still she insisted in pressing her pretty little theories on him.

"Your models are too harsh," she explained. "You should be more selective, my dear, make them more *beautiful*. The buttercup, for instance—it's really just a sweet and simple growing thing; all the complicated business you incorporate in your model about implacable forces making it what it is—well, isn't that just a little bit morbid?"

"If you call the truth morbid, yes," he said, but she was not expecting an answer.

"And the bonfire, for instance," she went on. "Couldn't that just be a rejoicing, boyish blaze, instead of all these terrible thoughts of death and the twigs dying wrapped up in it? I mean, don't think I'm criticising, will you, but I do feel . . ."

"I know," he said. "You feel art should tidy everything up and look steadfastly on the cheery side. 'Onward, Christian soldiers' all the way! You don't see that any real art must contain, must be big enough to contain, all of experience."

Yes, they were old arguments, used a thousand times before. They still had power to wound, because their present holders remained unalterably opposed.

Ninian broke down. He burst suddenly into a savage weeping new to Rowena, though familiar enough to me.

He broke down not because he cared a fig for her arguments, but because he didn't. If he had been sincerely interested in what she had to say, he might have quibbled happily all night; but it happened that on art, on his art, he knew he was right, did not mind a scrap what others thought. He had not intended to discuss art with Rowena, so his tears were tears of frustration.

She jumped up in distress.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, dear, only to try and explain my point of view," she cried, putting an arm over his thin shoulders.

This feminine blend of misunderstanding and physical proximity drove Ninian further into anger.

He stood up, confronting her with a red face, his eyes and nose running.

"You think you've got me where you want me, don't you?" he demanded, extravagantly. "You think you can boss me. You can see the sort of life I lead! You know I'm just a sort of bright freak, a sport, a mutant, and you want to come in and take charge, don't you? Well, you can't! I may be a nervous wreck, but I'm not going to be a slave—not to your stupid ideas, anyway!"

"Oh, you're so unfair!" she exclaimed. "You look so ugly!"

"Never mind what *I* look like. *I'm* not a work of art!"

And so on and so forth, all the biley, irrational rubbish of a quarrel. Five minutes later, Rowena walked out.

But because she was not only a silly girl but a kind one, she came back the next evening to see how Ninian was. She could not leave him just like that. Ninian had not appeared all day, not even to come down to his workshop; he remained upstairs in the room over the shop; I knew—sensed—perceived—he was lying on his bed, brooding, revelling in the blackness of life.

"Ninian!" she called, coming timidly in and standing only a couple of feet the other side of my blind. He barked some sort of a rough answer down the stairs.

"I've come back to say I'm sorry," she said meekly.

He sat bolt upright on the bed.

"Wait there!" he called.

She was not at ease. She seemed to be under some compulsion to come back here. She was unhappy about Ninian, but he and his art fascinated her. Otherwise she would not have compromised herself, coming alone here so frequently. Now she walked about the room, occasionally glancing at the ceiling, preparing herself to meet Ninian.

Unexpectedly, she turned and pulled up my blind.

We confronted each other, Rowena and I.

She had that wonderful dampness of eyes and mouth, and that luminous quality of the skin which go only to very young and healthy women. I saw the freshness of her lips as they parted slightly in horror of me, and realised how poor Ninian must covet them; they would be the oasis in his desert. Staring ahead, she made that futile gesture of brushing an imaginary strand of hair from her forehead.

She was still gazing at me when Ninian came down.

He scowled when he saw what she was doing, coming forward to pull down the blind again.

"What is it?" she said curiously.

"What does it look like to you?" he asked with equal curiosity, staying his hand.

Aversion on her face again, she turned back to me.

"It's another model in Cathus," she said. "But it's so much less clear than the others when they're switched off. It's so blurry. It's some sort of a statue with three heads, isn't it?"

He smiled.

"I'll tell you about it," he said. "It's a new experiment of mine."

And so Art, over which they had squabbled, drew them together again. I saw—divined—felt—by his face when he came downstairs that he had intended to be difficult; but the intention faded under that most prosaic of human urges, the wish to instruct. They sat cosily together on the sofa.

"So far I've only shown you models incorporating one single experience," he said. "A cactus, a buttercup, a cloud, a laugh, a bonfire, or whatever it may be. This one incorporates three experiences—similar experiences blended together."

He blushed.

"Pleasant experiences?" she asked.

"Well, really it's one experience, my experience of women," he said. "I've only known three women, you see, previously . . ."

"I see," she said, and strained silence fell.

"That's what I call it: My Experience of Women," he explained unnecessarily. Again there was silence.

Rowena turned to look at me again, her face full of a strange, moving hunger. Perhaps she had seen for the first time a way of sharing intimately in the warmth of another's life. Whatever her feelings, I knew her next words before she spoke them.

"Switch it on," she said huskily.

"It is on," Ninian said.

"It's an ugly thing, a deformed thing!"

"No, Rowena, you don't understand. This model's private. The others, being for sale, are attuned to a general waveband of receptivity; anyone can experience them. This one, being mine, is tuned only to me. To anyone else, My Experience of Women will remain ugly clay; only to me is it living and beautiful. I keep it switched on all the time; it radiates a sort of personality of its own; why, it's generally my only company here."

Getting up, Ninian pulled my blind down in an attempt to change the subject.

"So you've really got a statue of love there," Rowena said, her voice flattery.

"My kind of love .

"How—how does that differ from other people's?"

"Everyone's is different. I'll show you."

The next morning, Ninian came downstairs like a changed man, as he had done after experiencing those elements of Lettice, Joy and Queenie which now resided in me. He sang, he pranced, he chirped, he brushed the shop down before Wrybaker arrived. He was a man in love.

Then he came across to me.

"Good morning!" he exclaimed, flinging up the blind gaily.

I had been waiting for him in fear and dread. Only half-living, I cannot feel emotions properly. I felt only a little fear, yet it was the most I could feel. A fly dying feels only a little death, but it is enough.

"Now I can add to you," he said. "I can alter you, enlarge you, transform you, make you twice as wonderful."

He could do so very easily. He could now make something bigger, better, more complex than I was. But he would be killing me.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

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# The Beatific Smile

*It takes two to make a quarrel, so they say.  
Swanson could prove otherwise, however*

*Illustrated by D. McKeown*

"You," I said with cold deliberation, "are, without doubt, the most repulsive, degenerate, self-opinionated swine I have ever had the misfortune to meet."

Captain Joseph Melsham didn't answer.

"As an example of the human race," I continued, still with the same tone of cold deliberation, "you are an abject failure. It seems incredible to me that anyone could ever have been fool enough to have trusted you with anything more complex than a string of beads. Wire-strung beads, naturally, the kind even a cretin like you would have trouble pulling apart."

Melsham didn't say anything. He just rested against the far side of the can, eyes closed, a beatific smile creasing his lips. The smile infuriated me and I became a little more personal.

"Your mother was probably human," I mused. "I wouldn't like to be too specific as to just what sort of a human she was but she probably had the usual arrangement of ears and eyes, nose and mouth. And I'll even grant that she managed to walk upright most of the

time." I didn't want to be ungenerous to anyone's mother, even Melsham's. I'm not that kind of a man.

"Your father, though, that's difficult." I paused for thought, staring at Melsham's face hovering a couple of feet from my own. The blue emergency light was dim by normal standards but I'd become accustomed to it during the past six weeks. I'd grown to tolerate the over-grown coffin which I shared with the Captain and I'd even become acclimatized to the assorted smells, pea-soup atmosphere and sewer conditions of the life-can. What I couldn't learn to tolerate was Melsham himself.

"A barbary ape," I suggested, then immediately shook my head. "No, not an ape. Not a monkey, a gorilla or even a chimpanzee. Nothing even remotely human could ever have fathered you. Let's give the matter some thought." I studied his smile, the shape of his ears, the creases on his face, trying to fit each separate part of his facial anatomy against a scrappy background of long-forgotten natural history. I didn't hurry over it, I had plenty of time.

"The smile, if you can call that distorted grimace a smile, reminds me of a crocodile. The nose has some vague resemblance to that of a pig while the ears could well belong to any member of the canine family. The shape of the head eludes me, that pointed skull and overdeveloped jaw, the cheekbones and sunken eye-sockets." I sighed and gave a shrug. "Frankly, Joe, old man, your parentage poses an insolvable problem. The only thing I can assume to have fathered you is a combination of hyena, wart-hog, cat-fish and stink-worm, with maybe a touch of skunk thrown in." I sniffed at the air. "With certainly a touch of skunk thrown in."

All the talking had made me thirsty so I doubled and twisted, crawled and wriggled until I had reached the reclaim unit. Theoretically it was supposed to reclaim all the usable products from our waste, purifying the atmosphere and issuing it as pine-scented, earth-type, dust and germ free air. It was also supposed to reclaim all moisture and store it as a crystal-clear, urine-free, salinated and aerated nectar. On paper and maybe in a test laboratory the thing might have worked as the designers had fondly imagined it would. In actual practice the air was just about breathable and the reclaimed water was the biggest argument against teetotalism that I'd ever come across. But it was wet and, if it was also warm, redolent and opaque, it was better than nothing. Or almost.

My vocal chords lubricated, I wriggled, twisted, doubled and crawled until I was back in the only tolerable position in the life-can; resting with my feet towards the stinking reclaim unit, my head inches

from the tiny instrument panel with its built-in radio beacon and emergency light, my back resting lightly against the sweating curve of the ribbed hull. It also put me facing the closed eyes and smile of my sole companion in distress.

So I spat in his face.

There was a reason for it, of course, there is always a reason for everything. My reason was simply that I hated Melsham as I've never believed it possible to hate anyone. I hated him because of the discomfort I had to bear and he didn't. I hated him because he had been in command of the ship and, logically or not, I blamed him for having been in the same segment of space as the rogue meteor which had punctured our hull, smashed our engines and caused a general desire to get away as fast as possible from the resultant atomic death trap. So we had got away, all six of us, jetting into space in pairs, two to a life-can. And I had to draw the captain as partner.

"You know, Joe," I said conversationally. "I've often wondered just what terrible thing I must have done in some previous existence to have merited such punishment. Of all the people I could have been forced to share this can with I had to pick you." I glanced over my head at the calendar clock. "Six weeks, two days, five hours, eighteen minutes and twenty-seven seconds I've been cooped up in here ~~with~~ only you for company." I snorted at the thought of it. "Company! Hell, I'd rather be sharing a cage with a couple of skunks."

Melsham just smiled.

"Come to think of it I'd be better off at that," I mused. "At least I'd be getting fresh air if I was in a cage and if I was outdoors I could get a sight of the sun. And a couple of skunks could be fun. I could train them, maybe, teach them to come when I whistled, have them feeding out of my hand, riding on my shoulders, things like that." The more I thought of it the better the prospect seemed. "What do you think, Joe? A pair of skunks would be better company than you could ever be, wouldn't they?"

Melsham didn't answer. I wasn't really surprised, I hadn't expected anything different, but his silence didn't help the way I felt about him.

"You," I said, "are a dirty, yellow, whining coward."

No reaction. Or...?

"How you could ever raise enough courage to stare into a mirror I will never know," I continued. "I suppose a man can learn to live with himself if given enough time, but not with a face

like yours. I don't wonder that you ran away from normal life and hid yourself in space. Come to think of it there was nothing else you could have done. Not unless you'd got a job in a freak show." I chuckled at the thought. "Man! What a draw you would have been! The wart-hog-faced thing! Roll up and see the results of combining human and animal ancestry! Melsham the Missing Link!" My voice had risen higher than I liked and, when I stopped, the silence was deafening. I leaned forward to stare at the face opposite my own. It must have been imagination but it seemed to me that the beatific smile had grown even more beatific.

"Grin," I snapped. "Just lie there with that stupid, idiotic grin on your shapeless puss."

The reclamation unit gave a burp and a wave of sewer-smell rolled along the can towards me. I gagged, sucked a lungful of the apology for air and was promptly sick. Not that it made very much difference, not in the state I was in anyway, but it didn't do anything to ease my temper. Melsham seemed to find it amusing.

"You know something?" I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, determined, somehow, to wipe off his grin in the same way. "I guess that there isn't anything so pitiful as a man who thinks he is attractive to women and who looks like you. Nobcdy in their right mind could ever think for one moment that any woman could ever want to be with you for anything but your money. And you simply couldn't own enough money for any decent, presentable woman to want to be found dead in your company."

The reclam unit burped again just then and I struggled for breath. Having won that fight, I had a battle with my stomach; a battle which I lost together with most of the rations I'd eaten lately. That struggle over, with me winning by default, as it were, my eyes began to burn from the waste particles released by the defective reclaim unit. Everything considered, I was in a hell of a state and in just the right frame of mind to wish that I was dead and out of the whole stinking mess.

Melsham, of course, didn't feel that way at all, and with good reason. He was dead already.

Not dead permanently, of course. Nor dead drunk, dead tired, dead exhausted or dead beat. He was just dead temporarily. Out of this world, literally, the lucky swine, and I hated him for it. Nepthol had done it, naturally. We'd had words about it after the fuss and fury had died and we'd had time to take stock of our situation.

"We're in a tough spot, Swanson," he'd said, "but there is no need for panic. We're on the shipping lines and we'll get picked up sooner or later. Just keep that radio-beacon operating and we'll be all right."

"Yes, sir," I'd said. "But isn't the beacon automatic?"

"It is, but I want you to watch it all the same." He'd stared around at the twin-sized coffin we occupied. "Can't tell just how long rescue will be, of course, so I'd better take precautions. With me out of the way the water and food will last twice as long." He noticed my expression. "Something wrong?"

"As Captain, sir," I reminded, "shouldn't you remain in command?" The prospect of an indeterminate period of lonely guard-duty locked in the life-can didn't appeal to me. I'd never taken Nepthol but I'd heard about it and the reports sounded good. Just a prick in the arm and beautiful dreams until the medics pumped in the restorative. I'd never been shipwrecked before either, but it didn't need much imagination to foresee what life would be like after a few days in the can. Of the two unknowns I was willing to plump for the sweet dreams.

"Logically," agreed Melsham, "you are right. If you were anywhere near normal you would be right again. But you're a weedy runt while I'm pretty big." He looked at me from under his eyebrows. "Have you had experience of Nepthol?"

"Yes, sir." I was lying, but I hoped that it would make him change his mind. He seemed surprised.

"And you still want to take it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you can't." He flexed a big arm. "This body of mine uses twice the fuel yours does." He reached for the single dose resting in the injector tube clipped to the instrument panel. "Just keep things clean, Swanson, and press that button when that light flashes." He placed the injector on his bare skin. "Be good now." He grinned and pressed the release and, still grinning, passed into beautiful oblivion.

Leaving me to take care of the mess.

There were advantages, of course. I found them out as time dragged past. For example, Melsham was one of the biggest men I'd ever met. He had muscles like a wrestler and a frame to match. He had a quick temper, too, and a rough tongue which he wasn't slow in using. I'm more the refined type and could never match him in brawn, but that didn't mean that I liked his frequent tongue lashings. If he hadn't been the captain I'd have fixed him but good; a cook has



many ways of getting his own back, but a man has to be careful when dealing with someone like Melsham.

I suppose that everyone has toyed with dreams of telling their boss just what to do and where to go to do it. Now I had the chance and took it with both hands. Not that I was wholly to blame. I had to find something to occupy my mind during the long weeks we drifted in space and this was the most satisfying method of all. The fact that Melsham couldn't hear me didn't matter; it eased my soul and that was good enough. Maybe, in the years to come, he would guess at what I was laughing at, but he could never be sure. And that was the sweetest thing of all.

The reclaim unit grew worse and I knew that I'd have to fix it or go under. Fixing it was a job I knew I was going to detest, and I was right. The innards were caked with filth, and the stench was almost solid. I stripped the housing, cleared the mechanism as best I could and wearily crawled back to my usual position hoping that the air near the instrument panel would be a little less un-holesome than that I'd been breathing. It wasn't, which shouldn't have surprised

me; I'd managed to cover myself pretty well with partly processed waste.

I found myself glaring at Melsham's smile.

"Grin, you yellow swine," I snapped. "So you think it's funny just lying there enjoying your dreams. Get away from me." I reached out and pushed him in the face. He didn't travel far, just back to the hull, but my hand left an interesting imprint on his cheek. It gave me an idea.

"You're a baboon-faced dog," I said. "Baboon-faced dogs shouldn't have off-white skin even though it does look like scraped leather." I reached out and traced a thick moustache beneath his nose. I followed it with a couple of exaggerated eyebrows, drew thick sideboards and then, to finish off, wiped both hands over his face and neck. When I'd finished even his smile had vanished beneath a thick film of redolent goo.

Three days later we were rescued.

At first I hardly believed it. I'd been lying in a half-doze, half-coma, my throat dry from telling Melsham just what I thought of him, and getting rather worried because I'd discovered that I was beginning to repeat myself. Suddenly the emergency light was drowned in a red flash repeated at regular intervals and, lifting my head, I'd stared at the winking tell-tale. To press the respond button was automatic. Elation came afterwards.

"They've found us!" I felt so happy that I could have kissed even Melsham. "You hear me, you apology of a man, they've found us!"

Melsham didn't answer, naturally, but some of the goo had cracked away from around his mouth and I could see that he was smiling.

"That's right, Joe, smile!" I lifted his head towards me, using his ears as handles, and gently rapped his head against the hull. "Come on, you great big baby, you, wake up." I rapped a little harder. "Wake up you whining coward, the hard part's over. Old Swanson's brought you through as he said he would." The thud of Melsham's head punctuated my words. "How about a nice, big, happy smile after your seven-week sleep?"

I knew that he couldn't hear me or answer, but I also knew that this was probably the last chance I would ever get to tell him just what I thought about him. I wouldn't have bothered but for the fact that fixing the reclam unit had added the final straw. When I

thought of Melsham having a whale of a time in his dream world and me up to the eyebrows in stinking waste, it made me boil.

The grate of the contact tube came shortly after I'd pressed the respond button, and the scrape of the port being opened came soon after. A flood of light and fresh air blasted into the life-can and I heard a man cough and retch as he caught a lungful of our own atmosphere.

"What the hell? What's happened in there?"

"Reclam unit busted," I said cheerfully. I wriggled towards the opening and held up my hand. "Help me out of here, you guys."

"I ain't touching you until you've had a bath," said one of the rescuers determinedly. "Anyone else in there?"

"Only my Captain, he took Neptol." I climbed out of the can and straightened, filling my lungs with the clean, sweet air of the rescue ship. "I've had to wet-nurse him for seven weeks."

"We'll have to get him out of there," said one of the rescue party, a medic from his uniform. He didn't look too happy about it. "Sam, Fred, give me a hand."

They grumbled but they went, and while they were helping out the limp, goo-caked body, a crewman washed me down with a pressure hose. He stood well away from me as he blasted me with water, but I didn't mind that. I hadn't realised that such a little waste could cover so large an area.

"Over here with that hose, Carl." Sam rose from where they had placed Melsham. "Just wash him off before we restore him."

"What about me?" I demanded. "I'm not clean yet and I want some clothes. Melsham can wait; he's been taking it easy for the past few weeks."

"Easy?" One of the medics raised his eyebrows. "Under Neptol? You kidding?"

"Like hell I'm kidding." I was getting angry. "I'm the one who had to take care of things. I'm the one who had to fix the busted reclam unit and spend all that time alone in that can. All he did was to take some dope and sleep the time away."

"You ever taken Neptol?" Sam looked towards me; I didn't like his expression.

"No."

"Then pipe down until you know more about it."

"What are you trying to feed me?" I caught one of the medics by the arm. "It's just sleep-dope, isn't it? Something to pass the time."

"Tell him," said Sam wearily. "Tell him while we get this hero back on his feet." He reached for a king-sized hypodermic and began to search Melsham for a big enough vein. I swallowed as the medic I had hold of put me in the picture.

"Nephol isn't what you think it is," he explained. "It knocks you out, sure, but in a very special kind of way. It lowers the metabolism so that you don't need water or food and hardly any air, but it doesn't touch the brain. Your body slows down and that's about all."

"I know that," I said impatiently. "That's why it's used, so that two guys can live twice as long as they would do if one of them didn't take the dope. I'm not simple."

"No?" He shrugged. "Well, that's about all there is to it. The body slows down to a point where it would take about two months to open your eyes. But not the mind, boy, that doesn't slow down at all. And you don't clock off, not at all. Get it?"

"You mean?" A horrible thought had just struck me. "You mean that he could hear me all the time? Feel me? Is that it?"

"Sure. That's why it takes guts to take Nephol. It's like going into a kind of prison in which you can hear everything about you but you can't move and you can't sleep. You've got to close your eyes to protect them but you can't close your ears." He chuckled. "Funny things happen at times when a guy doesn't know the full effects. I remember one case. " He broke off, staring at me "Something wrong?"

There was, but how could I tell him? How could I ever tell Melsham that it was all a joke, that I hadn't meant a word that I'd said and that I didn't know he could hear me anyway? How, after telling him that I'd used Nephol?

I stared, boggled-eyed, to where he was slowly rising to his feet. He was still smiling and his arms, as he flexed them, looked horribly big.

And he had such a beatific smile.

E. C. TUBB



# Wish Upon a Star

*Bliss awaited him on this strange and lovely planet—but Karnac preferred only to remember, and live*

For hours, while the ship had approached Arachne 4, the communicator had gibbered. Karnac was puzzled—true, he was on the edge of known Space, but his translating unit had never before failed to analyse a new language. The third finger of his left hand ached—which was strange for it was missing, smashed away by a grain of meteor-dust. His right knee felt weak, where he'd caught a blast from an Arcturan stun-gun. Trouble, he felt, wasn't far away. The communicator was still clacking nonsense, and the translator buzzing with the effort of trying to fulfil its task.

Karnac grunted angrily. He didn't like the smell of things—there was something strange about this planet. It was out of character—like a top hat in a crowd of cloth caps. The other planets of Arachne were young—semi-molten, a mere thousand million years out of the hot womb of their sun—but this one was green and lush, with atmosphere and clouds, seas and vegetation—it didn't belong.

Indecisively Karnac rubbed the white stubble on his chin. He didn't *want* to land on this planet, but *had* to. Fuel and food were short—too short lightly to risk a long search for another Earth-type planet. From Arachne 4 his mining machines could soon extract enough suitable material for his synthesisers to work on—it wouldn't

take long, and it was the sensible thing to do, but Karnac didn't like it.

Antigone, his daughter, entered the control. She was like a corpulent ghost, with her long blonde hair and chalky bloated face. Karnac hated the sight of her—had done for forty years, ever since she stopped being a baby and became the pasty-faced thing she was now. Gina, his wife, had died giving birth to her. He wondered why he hadn't turned her out years ago—but in his secret mind he knew that hate of her gave his life purpose.

Antigone was frightened. Her loose, wet, lower lip was trembling, and there was a tic in her left cheek. Always, when the ship came close to a planet, she was frightened. Born in deep Space, she hated to be away from it. A strand of hair floated across her face, and she did not brush it back.

"Father," she whined, "we aren't going to land, are we?"

Karnac ignored her question, and enjoyed her fear.

With fat, flabby fingers she grasped his arm. "Don't land," she pleaded, "let's stay in Space, in the ship. It's safe in the ship."

Karnac shook his arm from her grasp. "You want to eat I suppose," he said roughly, staring at the swollen contours of her body, grotesque under her short toga. She was a glutton, but a good cook—something for which to be grateful.

Antigone looked at him—bewildered. She always did when he tried to explain to her that the ship was not self-sufficient. To her the ship was a World.

Under her stare Karnac became irritated. "We must land," he snapped. "If we don't there'll be no more food from the synthesiser—can you understand that?"

"There's always been food from the synthesiser," she said. "You just want to get onto a planet, you always do." Her voice rose accusingly. "You want to leave me to die in the ship." She caught his arm again. "Don't leave me." She was crying.

Karnac was angry. Always it was the same—he enjoyed the earlier stages of her fear, but the crying embarrassed him. "Shut up," he shouted. This was his invariable reaction. Momentarily he had the sensation of being trapped in a treadmill of his own making.

Antigone snivelled on. Taking her arm Karnac flung her outside the control and slammed the door. Her opposition finally decided him. He *would* land—premonition or no. He punched out a landing tape, and was about to feed it into the Brain when he had an idea. Quickly he added a direction that, after landing, the Brain should

couple with the translator to find the key to the language of the strange message, then he fed in the tape.

As he settled in his acceleration chair, took his anti-stress pill, and sounded the landing alarm he hoped that he would dream of Gina, and the happy months they'd spent together on Earth fifty years ago — he usually did, but sometimes his daughter was in the dreams, or he relived the terrible time of Gina's death — he hoped he would dream of a good time

Antigone was still asleep in her acceleration bunk. She usually took a double dose of anti-stress pills, so that she would sleep all the time they were planet-bound. Karnac opened the air-lock.

Grass rustled high about the ship, rustled with the wind and the secret caresses of the little things that lived at its roots. Sitting on the lip of the airlock Karnac accepted the peace of the scene. To his right, as far as a range of low green hills, undulated a plain. The tall grass that covered it rippled like water under the whiplash paths of the breeze. Trees masked the lower slopes of the hills, but their summits were clothed only with lush grass. One hill, a little higher than the others, had a curiously symmetrical clump of trees at its highest point. Karnac had a niggling feeling that he knew this place from a long time ago, it was like a fuzzy memory, but had nothing of the sharpness and surprise that comes when one sees again, in actuality, a long remembered place.

That was silly, he told himself.

On his left a long winding estuary snaked away to the sea. The tide was falling, and mud banks humped their glistening backs through the water. A bird was calling—a thin, fluting cry, mournful and yet pleasant. There was a stiff breeze—force four, a good sailing wind, and still sufficient water in the creek for a small boat to come up comfortably.

With a thrill, almost of horror, Karnac saw that there *was* a boat coming up the channel, far away as yet—a tiny triangle of white sail—but approaching fast under the fresh wind. Somehow he felt afraid—why, he hardly knew, for anyone using a sailing boat would hardly attack a space-ship. He still had the feeling that he knew this place.

The mining machines had scuttled out of sight, like frightened, metallic crabs. They would be back, satiated, he knew, within the hour, before the boat reached the nearest spot on the creek. He examined the charge of his stun-gun, and then dropped from the airlock to the ground, landing carefully on his good leg.

The place was perfect—no doubt about that. He couldn't have wished for anything better. He had always liked the melancholy beauty of a tidal estuary. He walked slowly through the grass to the water's edge. It was in such a place as this that he had met Gina—long ago—on Earth. There had been the Downs in the background, just as there were hills in the background now, and . . . *that was it*.  
. . . the symmetrical clump of trees on the hill . . . there had been such a clump on the Downs . . . that accounted for the feeling of preknowledge he'd had about this place . . . a strange coincidence though.

He was on the bank of the creek. Here a pebbly hard ran out into the water, though on either side was mud. It was fortunate that he should strike the creek at the place where a hard existed. He walked out over stones still wet from the retreating tide. His feet made a sound like that you hear when biting a gritty sandwich. The sun was warm on his face. There was an old, rusted buoy lying, half buried in the shingle—he hadn't noticed it before, but now that he saw it he realised that he was tired. He climbed on the buoy and sat watching the boat's approach. She was not coming as fast as he had first thought, for the tide was against her.

He wished he had a cigarette. He needed a cigarette to complete the pleasure of the scene. The sun and wind on his face, the sound of water on the shore, and the melancholy bird cries would all be the better for the comforting bite of tobacco in his lungs. *There was a quiet sound—like a small gong being struck!* Something white in the corner of his vision attracted his eyes. He turned his head. Lying in the reeds, not three yards from him, was a packet of cigarettes. Slowly, wonderingly, he stepped from the buoy and picked them up. They were his favourite brand. He had run out of cigarettes on the ship three weeks ago!

While his hands automatically took out a cigarette and placed it in his mouth, where it lighted itself, his mind rationalised the occurrence. The short jacket he had slipped on over his toga—he hadn't worn it for months, there must have been a pack of cigarettes in the pocket, and they'd fallen out as he walked down the hard . . . that was it, that was the explanation.

He went back to the buoy, and again sat down.

The boat was now appreciably closer. He could make out the rig. She was a gaff sloop, an old-fashioned, safe sort of boat—Gina's boat had been a gaff sloop. Strange that here, on this planet, uncounted light-years from Earth, there should be a boat of the same rig . . . but then sailing boats might easily follow the same

lines of development—nearly every intelligent race in the Federation had come up with the same answer to Space travel.

He remembered how he had met Gina how she'd come sailing up just such a creek in her little boat, with her red hair shining above a yellow toga.

The boat, which had been coming up the creek on a close reach with the wind on her beam, was tacking now as she negotiated a bend. She was still too far away for Karnac's old eyes to pick out any details.

He was thirsty. He imagined a long, cool drink cider, a golden, glowing pint of it—with ice cubes chinking the sides of the glass tankard how good that would be. *There was a quiet sound—like a small gong being struck!* A movement caught his attention. He looked beside him on the buoy. A tankard of cider, with ice cubes floating in it stood beside him!

His hand took the glass. There was condensation on the outside, where the coolness of the ice was taking moisture from the atmosphere.

There was no rationalisation for this. He didn't think anymore. This was no dream—there was no distortion, no lack of continuity—all that was happening was perfect, but impossible!

For a long time Karnac sat, looking at the tankard in his hand. Slowly the ice cubes dissolved, leaving only golden cider invitingly sparkling in the glass. The sun was warm on his face, and the wind moved in his hair. He had no thought, only an awareness of his immediate surroundings. He did not look up.

Then, just as he was about to drink, the fear that had gathered in his unconscious burst into his ego. Sweat coated his face. He dropped the tankard. It broke on the pebbles. Slowly, painfully he lifted his head. It was as if he did so against the will of his body, for his muscles seemed to strain in opposition to the movement. The boat was close now—two hundred yards away. A woman was at the tiller . . . *a woman with red hair and a yellow toga!*

The sweat on his body was cold and clammy. His heart was kicking at his rib cage, and his lungs squeezed his breath out in short, explosive exhalations. He said "no", in a high pitched voice. Gina was long dead. She died fifty years ago. He had buried her in Space.

The boat was closing on the hard.

Karnac felt a fear so great and strange that it seemed to him that he must swell up and burst with it. Then his body took charge, and he was running towards the ship, uttering little moans of terror

as he crashed through the long grass. She was calling him . . . her voice shrill to carry against the wind. He ran faster. He was afraid to feel her touch on his shoulder.

The ship . . . he was clambering through the air-lock, bruising and tearing his shins in his frantic speed. Almost unconsciously—the reflexes of fifty years in Space defied even his terror—he noted that the synthesiser was full, and that the mining machines were in place. Antigone was still asleep in her acceleration bunk.

Karnac fell into the control chair. Shakily he smashed a take-off pattern into the panel, and the ship, shuddering under maximum acceleration lifted her great bulk from the planet.

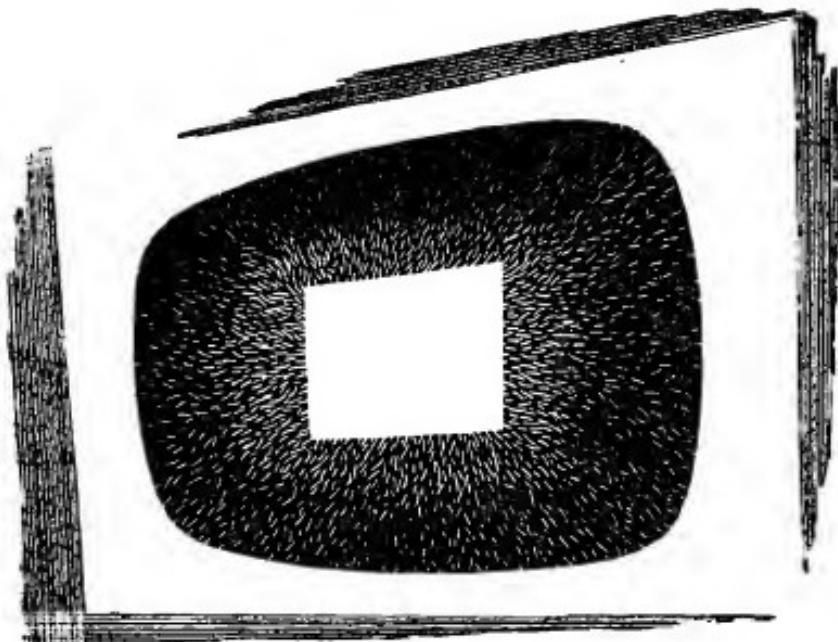
Pinned down into the soft depths of the control chair, consciousness leaving him slowly as speed increased, Karnac heard the Brain giving its report on the cryptic message received on the way down.

"Translation of message accomplished at 0455 hours Federation standard time. Language of unique complication, requiring full use of all circuits, suggests highly developed civilisation responsible. Message was as follows: FOR SALE, THIS DESIRABLE PSYCHO-PLASTIC PLANETARY RESIDENCE, IN QUIET SECLUDED SURROUNDINGS, EQUIPPED WITH THE MOST MODERN QUICK-ACTING EGO-SYMPATHETIC-SYNTHESISERS, SUITABLE FOR RETIRED QUADRUPLE. DESIGNED BY FRAD, THE WELL-KNOWN ORIGINATOR OF KRUPPA INSTANT REACTING PSYCHOPLASM—THE PSYCHOPLASM THAT ANTICIPATES YOUR EVERY DESIRE. APPLY HUTTA, HUTTA AND GLOG, ESTATE AGENTS, KNOBB II, BETA GALAXY."

PETER J. RIDLEY







# War Against Darkness

*Out across the Galaxy they spread, engulfing a million solar systems—and then they laid their plans for Earth*

*Illustrated by Harry Turner*

My name is Charles Wallace Magellan, which sounds the kind of name that ought to mean something. My father was sure it would do.

I always doubted it. But as things are turning out, it seems he'll be right—but not quite in the way he expected. He'd hoped I'd follow his trade, and he taught me all he knew.

Well, I tried hard enough to follow the family profession and be worthy of him. He was the greatest safe-cracker since the original of Jimmy Valentine.

But the times were against me, as indeed they ran against father during the latter half of his life.

A sort of febrile mechanical plague hit the world and the rash was permanent almost before anyone realised it. It was called "automation", and after the initial delirium mankind came round to find it had been swept on into a very different world. The World of Plenty, the Age of Leisure. Adam's curse had been lifted.

That meant most people found themselves out of a job. "Most people" included hitherto hard-working criminals like father. Everyone could just help themselves to most of the material things they wanted—from the mechanical cornucopia. They largely lost the sense of the value of money. They left it lying around. Anyone could pick it up.

Safes went out of fashion like Norman castles and moats. For the same reason: there was no longer a need for them. It all but broke my father's heart.

It might have done so altogether, but he was good at kidding himself.

"It won't last, son," he told me, too often. "People have got too much of everything right now. Soon, they'll get bored to death. Why? Because men aren't meant to be all on one level. Most folk have just *got* to have something the others haven't got—a *better* diamond necklace, a *better* gold watch, or *what have you*."

My father was brilliant, but only in his own particular rut. Most criminals are creatures of habit. Jewellery was his line. He knew the safest and least greedy fences. But machines could and did produce artificial gems bigger and better than the naturals. You could get them for a song.

The fences retired to grow marrows in their suburban gardens and the professional ice-lifters turned to poker for excitement.

But my father wasn't fond of cards. He became aimless, introspective about the good old days. Often I happened on him brooding over his press-cutting albums, with their gratifyingly large headlines, such as: DARING CAT-BURGLAR STEALS HOPEWORTH DIAMONDS.

Then he'd tell me, over and over, just how he'd done it.

Sometimes the repetition bored me to screaming point, but I never actually screamed, because I loved him. But one day the end-

less stories ended, I thought he'd fallen asleep, sprawled across one of his open albums. Then I saw the empty phial lying under his hand.

He didn't leave a suicide note or anything. He didn't have to. I knew just how the World of Satiety had stifled him with frustration. Until then, I'd taken that world as it had come. But because it had killed my father I started to hate it too. And, irrationally, like most criminals, I began to take my revenge on society.

I robbed people right and left. I manipulated them, made fools of them, and fed on the sense of power it gave me.

I did it in the only way possible in such days. I was Magellan the Medium.

I read people's minds and told them what they already knew—I never could see why they assumed that to be evidence for survival. I made tables rap and levitate. In dim-lit rooms I let "ectoplasm" assume whatever fond form my eager sitters willed to imagine. Everyone was so anxious to perform my miracles for me.

In direct voice sittings I was Mrs. Brown's dead son, Jack, or Mr. Jones' dead wife, Lil, or somebody's deceased uncle or aunt. Direct voice was the most popular form of message from beyond. I found there was a widespread desire—and not only from the old folk—for some assurance that there existed another world somewhere beyond this present land of milk and honey.

Occasionally, to relieve the tedium, I rendered such messages as coming from eminent defunct personages. Sometimes Einstein, sometimes Julius Ceasar, though a particular favourite of mine was Napoleon I. But the great were seldom a hit. The ordinary run of folk preferred to get their dope direct from the lips of young Joe or Uncle Fred.

Oddly, the modern conception of paradise seemed to be a place where you weren't just one of a pap-fed herd, but an individual allowed to do some sort of work for your living.

"I bake all the bread for our happy little community," I would croak in the rôle of the late Mr. Guggenheim. And Mr. Guggenheim, Junior, all ears, would sigh enviously and mumble: "I wish I were there with you, Dad."

I told the Guggenheims and Smiths and Jacksons what they wished to believe, made them happy, and didn't say no to the gifts they offered in gratitude. After a few years in business, I had as good an art collection as anyone in London and a fine Georgian house, stuffed with antiques, on the heights of Hampstead.

I also had a rare antique Rolls car, of the kind which ran by internal combustion and you had the fun of steering yourself. The

modern electronic self-drive type of car, which never ran into anything, never broke down, and never lost the way, bored me.

Hampstead, as ever, had a shifting population, a large proportion of it being foreigners. Little colonies were always springing up, growing, fading, changing.

I was puzzled by a recent one. They were all weedy, undersized, sallow-faced men—I never saw any women. They didn't converse much in public. When they did, it was in a sibilant whisper. Their grammar and pronunciation were impeccable, but they were certainly un-English. Every "s" was a hiss. Also, they spoke flatly, without expression, like a stage Oriental.

I couldn't place the country but I guessed it was a very hot one. For even on scorching summer days these strange men wore kapok-lined coats. And if there were but the slightest zephyr, they'd turn up their coat-collars against it as though it were a wind from Siberia.

I seemed to be meeting more and more of them in the avenues around my house.

One day came a ring at the front door. I opened it. Under the skimpy portico stood one of these queer fish. He stared silently at me as though I were the queer fish. There was something odd about his eyes—I'd noticed it with others of his kind. The irises were so black that the pupils scarce showed against them. The effect of these two glassily blank discs regarding me was disturbing.

"Mr. Charles Magellan?" said my visitor suddenly, with a pneumatic hiss.

I started. "The one and only," I admitted. "What can I do for you?"

"I wish to discuss some business." That bit sounded like a fight in a snake pit.

"By all means. Do come in."

He came, treading so silently and closely behind me into my lounge that I started again when I turned and found him breathing in my ear.

"My name is Willoughby," he said. I didn't believe it, but nodded and asked: "You wish to arrange for a sitting?"

He didn't reply at once. His black marble eyes were taking in my lounge. Then he turned them on me and hissed: "I meant serious business."

My dislike hardened. But I only smiled blandly and said: "My dear Mr. Willoughby, what can be more serious than converse with the departed?"

He disregarded that. "The Government has need of this house," he said, flatly. "Perhaps we can arrange terms."

I tried to hide my astonishment. "'We?' You are the Government?"

"Part of it. I'm Assistant Under-Secretary to the Director."

"Congratulations," I said, politely.

"Possibly you aren't aware that the Government owns all the houses in this vicinity except yours."

"Well, Mr. Willoughby, I'm aware now. You want to complete your collection?"

"You might say that."

"I just did. What's the idea? Aren't the Houses of Parliament big enough any more?"

Willoughby began sibilantly to explain that the Director thought it expedient to have the members of his inner circle living in the same neighbourhood so that extempore meetings could be held.

I lent him but half an ear. Politics no longer interested me nor anyone very much. They were always pretty much of a sham, and now they were wholly so.

You were allowed to vote for your local scientific director. To show that democracy was still breathing, you had a choice of three. On polling day you were expected to press any of three buttons on the election panel, standard in every home.

Somewhere a computer would compute, and at midnight a lamp would light above the victor's button. I seldom cared to wait up for it, because I seldom cared to press the button in the first place. I doubted if others did, either.

We knew Mr. Green Button didn't represent Smith, Jones, or Magellan. He represented an abstract called "science." Who really cared? There were no oppressed minorities, no shortages of anything, no injustices to get het up about.

Yet, aloofly listening to the fluting Willoughby, I began to ask myself if we shouldn't have cared a bit more. Who exactly knew who the Government were and what they were up to—excepting themselves?

I certainly shouldn't have voted for this spindly, glassy-eyed, two-legged serpent if I'd really known what I was doing. How many more of the Government were like him?

I found myself wondering about the strange Hampstead colony of specimens like him, sallow little runts like walking cocoons. I recalled how they whispered conspiratorially when they met. Something was afoot. I smelt it, and it didn't smell like attar of roses.

I returned my whole attention to Willoughby. He was suggesting the Government let me have in exchange for *Hillcrest* a fine mansion in Regent's Park, surplus Government property.

"Suppose I say no?"

"Then the Director would move that the Government employ its plenipotentiary powers to requisition this house."

"A polite way of saying he'd throw me out on my neck?"

Willoughby shrugged his almost non-existent shoulders.

I decided it was time someone poked his nose into this rat's nest, and it might as well be my nose. I said: "Look here, Willoughby, I'd like to discuss this directly with your Number One—the Director himself. If he can put it to me reasonably, then, well, I'll try to be as reasonable."

"The Director," said Willoughby, icily, "has no time to waste on discussing side issues like this."

"I quite understand. I'm a busy man myself. Goodbye, Willoughby. When you send the broker's men, they'll find the door locked."

I hustled him out of my house before he'd properly registered that, and shut the heavy front door on him. Solid as it was, I knew it couldn't shut out the Government. But I thought they'd probably talk again before they brought along the battering rams.

And they did talk again, that very afternoon, through a much more attractive medium than Willoughby.

The visaphone gong sounded melodiously, and then framed in the screen was the face of Helen of Troy—as I'd always pictured her. She was a truly classical blonde, with an exquisite coiffure of tight curls, a noble brow, a ruler-straight nose, a Grecian mouth, and calm, wide-set, azure eyes.

The vision spoke, and remained a vision. For her voice was in keeping: calm as her eyes, soft as her hair, sweet as her mouth. The words were everyday business jargon, but the way she said them they sounded like poetry.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Magellan. I am Sarah Masters, personal secretary to the Director. I understand you wish to see him about a matter concerning your house."

Like Brutus, she paused for a reply. And like Romeo, I muttered: "Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?"

She smiled, and I—impressionable fool—was put altogether beyond speech, though she waited patiently for it. At length she aid: "Perhaps you would call on me first?"

I nodded stiffly.

"Say at five o'clock this afternoon?"

I managed another nod.

"The house is called *Moravia*, the next but two from your own, eastwards. Goodbye for now, Mr. Magellan."

Properly, then, the vision should have faded like a dream. Instead of which, it was cut off by the visaphone's sharp disconnecting click. And the screen and I were left staring blankly at each other.

It took me some time to pull myself together. The impact of Sarah Masters had knocked me back temporarily into lovesick adolescence.

I told myself many times I was a fool, but at five to five my over-eager feet were crunching hurriedly along the old-fashioned gravel drive that led to *Moravia*. It was the second biggest house in the road—mine was the biggest.

As I climbed the doorsteps, the front door opened of itself, welcomingly. Somewhere in the house someone was watching my approach—probably the Divine Sarah herself. I became all too self-conscious.

I found myself in a hall which ran through the house. At the far end of it another door was swinging open automatically for me. I was just a bit disappointed with Sarah. For myself I preferred to push a door rather than a button. I disliked this modern belief that opening and shutting doors by hand was literally manual labour.

Halfway down the hall I paused. For, coming faintly through a closed door on my right, was the sound of sibilant voices. Quite a gathering, it seemed to be.

I was never afraid of manual labour, so I opened that door by hand, very suddenly. A body of warm air flowed past me. I had crashed a committee meeting of perhaps a dozen little snakemen with dirty yellow faces. They were seated at a long, shiny table, hissing together in chorus, but not in English. To me it was an unknown tongue.

One alone was motionless and silent. He sat at the head of the table, facing me, and saw me at once. He raised his hand swiftly, palm outwards, and all the rest in an instant became as silent as he. They turned to regard me with those black, pupil-less eyes. The effect was eerie.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," I said, deferentially. "This is the Hampstead Literary and Debating Society?"

They remained as frozen as a tableau at Madame Tussaud's.

They looked skinnier than ever, reed-slender. This was because they'd discarded their kapok-padded coats. They didn't need them in this room. The central heating was at full blast. The air was torrid.

The head man opened his small mouth tightly, the merest fraction, as though he was afraid I might see his tongue. Perhaps it was forked.

"You are?" he demanded, chillingly.

"Yes, I am," I admitted, with what in friendlier surroundings might have been a winning smile. This answer seemed to non-plus him.

A much pleasanter voice than his suddenly sounded behind me. "That is the wrong room, Mr. Magellan. Please come this way."

It was Sarah, of course. When I turned and saw her, I gladly shut the little men up in their room again. She was of royal height, which meant that she was quite four inches taller than me. And her figure certainly needed no kapok padding.

She wore an ankle-length dress, tight-fitting, yet with long voluminous sleeves. It was pale yellow, filmy and insubstantial stuff. To my bemused mind she seemed to float down the hall ahead of me like an ethereal being.

We entered the room at the back of the house, and the door shut itself behind us with a vicious bang. That rude slam was the first and most minor of the shocks which brought me back to my senses.

I'd only the vaguest anticipation of what her room would be like. Something exotic, perhaps. Something very feminine, certainly. Instead of which, it was like some electronic laboratory or the control tower of a great airport.

Two walls were like the multi-facetted eyes of a giant insect. Every facet was a TV or visaphone screen. Quite half of the screens were showing live but silent pictures.

A third wall was mostly a control panel, all switches and winking lights. The fourth wall was a room-long window, framing much the same southern panoramic view visible from my own house: London, a few miles away and hundreds of feet below. The grey bubble which was the dome of St. Paul's was still a focal point in this London of 1986.

The floor was bare, brown marloneum, cold, businesslike. In its centre was a severe metal desk, barnacled with press-buttons. Beside it was a solitary chair. One of us was going to remain

standing. Sarah decided who. She helped herself—but not me—from a cigarette box on the desk, seated herself, put her feet up on the desk, tilted her chair back so that she could lounge comfortably, lit up, and blew cigarette smoke at the ceiling.

This was not the way for a near-goddess to behave. I was shocked.

And shocked again when she turned hard eyes on me and said in a voice even harder: "Why the hell do you have to play at being awkward, you silly little man?"

I just gaped. The transformation had been so sudden. Nothing was left of Helen of Troy except her shape. This new personality was as tough and crude as a harpy and as friendly as a wildcat. The blue of her eyes had become cold ice-blue.

"I'm going to have your house, with or without your consent," she said. "Make no mistake about that, Mr. Magellan the Medium. It makes no difference to me, either way, but it will to you if you don't move out."

I groped and found my lost voice. "*You* want my house?"

"The Director promised it to me, for my own use. For being such a helpful secretary." She sounded ironical.

I felt I needed a cigarette and took one from the box. "You and the Director can go and jump in the Whitestone Pond," I said.

She jumped, but not into the pond. She sprang up and caught me a clout which knocked my cigarette spinning across the room. My ears sang. There was nothing ethereal about her right arm.

I stared at her contemptuously, which might have been more effective if I hadn't had to stare *up* at her. Then I turned to stalk with dignity from the room. I didn't get far. The door was locked. I suspected it had locked itself when it slammed. No doubt it could be opened from inside the room at the touch of a button or switch. But there were maybe a hundred buttons and switches.

I knew other ways to open it, but I needed tools.

Sarah watched me grimly. I marched back solemnly, grabbed the chair and flung it at the wide window. There was a dull clank. The chair rebounded and thudded on the floor. The window wasn't even cracked. I might have guessed: clearplast, tough as steel.

We both looked at the chair, then at each other. Suddenly, the inexplicable creature threw her head back and laughed. It wasn't an unpleasant laugh, either: there was real humour in it.

I couldn't repress a rueful grin myself.

Still mirthful, all the harshness gone again, she proffered the cigarette box. "Try another one."

I did. She said: "As you refuse to be reasonable, I've to keep you here another hour—Director's instructions. The general transmission has been delayed an hour, you see, and Willoughby reported you haven't a TV set in your home."

"Did he, the snooper! I hate TV. What general transmission are you talking about?"

"Oh, forget it. Let's talk. As one charlatan to another, how's tricks in the spirit world?"

"So you've been checking up on me, Sarah? As one charlatan to another, what racket are you mixed up in here?"

She looked at me reflectively and drew at her cigarette. Then she said: "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. So I'll tell you. The cat's being let out of the bag today, anyhow."

So she told me, and at length. And I didn't believe it. No one in his senses could. It was mad, and she was mad, too.

The little yellow men came from a hot climate, all right, but from no tropics of Earth. Heaven knew where they had started from, but they were spreading over the Galaxy like a disease. Moreover, they'd been doing so for hundreds of thousands of years.

They were the Makkees.\*

Compared with a Makkee's span of life, a man endured no longer than a butterfly. Yet they were humanoid too. And by a slow, insidious method they were conquering every humanoid race they discovered in their enormously long history of space exploration.

They were the sowers of what came to be called "civilisation", towns and communication, mechanised factories and agriculture and public services. But for the Makkees, man would still be a naked creature of the forests. By some form of radiation they implanted a standard pattern in the chromosomes of selected groups of primitive men.

That pattern remained indelibly in the immortal chromosomes as they were passed on from generation to generation.

Among millions of others, Archimedes, Hero, da Vinci, Marconi and Edison had carried that pattern. It was the pattern of the born inventor. Each recipient of it had a driving urge to invent which seldom let him rest.

So the inventors had led us through the Stone Age to the Iron Age, through the Steam Age to the Atomic Age and the Age of

\* See the author's previous story in this series, Against Goliath, (NEBULA No. 23).

Automation. Through those same ages the Makkees were sweeping on, sowing their seeds on myriads of other planets.

And now a whole mass of their descendants—not all that far removed—were about to move in and reap the harvest on Earth. For unwittingly man had sweated to build a home for them on Earth, a fully automatic world. Despite their longevity, the Makkees were physically feeble, indeed, soft. Comfort and every possible labour-saving device had become necessities. The press-button was their emblem.

Sarah Masters recited this fantastic tale to me with an unbecoming relish. Sometimes she chuckled aloud at the smartness of the Makkees and the incredible myopia of we terrestrial suckers.

She answered my sceptical questions without evasion, except on one point. How had the Makkees infiltrated into the British Government—indeed, had apparently become it?

"They have their methods," she said, cryptically.

The Director, of course, was the leader of this particular advance party of Makkees. Other advance parties had secured control of other countries. They were all in touch with each other—she waved her hand airily to encompass the massed batteries of TV screens in this very room.

"I'm on the network, too, you see. Partly it's my job to be. Partly it's because I'm a woman and like to hear all the gossip. It's nice to be in the know." She brooded a moment. "I was always left out of things once."

Subconsciously I'd been aware all the time of the lighted screens and off and on wondering vaguely about them. Some of them just showed complex, ever-changing patterns, which meant nothing to me. But also there were lots of thin, ugly Makkee faces mouthing silently, doubtless from all corners of the globe—maybe even from other planets or ships in outer space.

I wondered where the main invasion body was at this moment. Perhaps somewhere beyond Alpha Centauri, waiting for the signal that it was moving day at last.

Then I cursed myself for beginning to swallow this nonsense.

Yet how to explain this peculiar colony of certainly unearthly creatures and the bizarre set-up in this house? More immediately, how to explain Sarah Masters?

I didn't have to try. Unasked, she began to explain herself, or rather, themselves. She'd cut herself off from her own kind to live with the Makkees. They were humanoid but not human, not

*simpatico.* They wouldn't be the slightest bit interested in the conflicts of a mixed-up girl.

But she had to unburden herself to someone. I just happened to be there.

Like all unbalanced people, her trouble had begun in childhood. She was an only child, her mother a brilliant artist, her father a brilliant concert pianist. Both had a *prima donna* temperament. Both put their art before anything else. Neither had any parental sense.

It was made clear to Sarah that she was no more than an encumbrance to them in their careers. She was no love-child, merely an irritating mistake. Quite openly they deplored her very existence. Mother—a born nomad—would feel the urge to join a faraway artists' colony and live the bohemian life. She would try to palm Sarah off on Father. But he was planning a concert tour of Australia.

"It wouldn't be fair to the child," he'd protest, and Sarah would be planted yet again on some reluctant relative.

Sometimes, pitifully, she strove to enter their worlds and their minds. But obviously she didn't belong there: she was colour-blind and tone-deaf. They spoke a language she couldn't learn.

"In time," said Sarah, "I really came to believe I was a creature from another world, a changeling. Nobody on this earth wanted me, nobody would claim me. I began to hate everybody, my parents most of all. How dare they kick me around like a football? Why should *any* human beings have power over me? I resolved that it would be I who would have power over them. *All* of them. Including my so-called parents."

She was frowning, her mouth was bitter, and she was squeezing her hands hard together, as though she were imagining the whole human race had but one neck and she was throttling it.

She went on: "I worked hard and got a secretarial post in the Government. And then, from nowhere, came the Makkees, and *became* the Government. I stayed with them. I looked on them as avenging angels, come to knock the *hubris* out of the humans. Well, they're not angels, neither are they avengers. But they are going to put the stinking, self-important humans back in their humble place in this universe. I'm all for them."

"Which makes you a traitor to the human race, Sarah."

She turned a freezing regard on me. "I should have saved my breath. Is it impossible for you to understand that I don't—and never did—belong to the human race?"

I laughed, and was immediately classed with the rest of man-

kind as an object of hate. She glared at me like Medusa.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but you're only too human. You're like a naughty little girl dressed up in the mantle of Milton's Satan and ridiculously smothered by it. It's strictly a male rôle and usually pretty absurd, anyway. Hitler was as absurd as he was evil. My favourite clown-hero Napoleon was even more absurd. But you, my dear, aren't so much comic as touching. You're still a hurt and bewildered child. I understand, and I'm sorry for you."

She said between clenched teeth: "Save your pity, Magellan—for yourself. You'll need it, I can assure you."

She glanced at her watch, though there was a chronometer on the control panel. We'd been talking for an hour. She went over to the panel and began to snap switches. The TV screens blinked out one by one until only two were left alive. One pictured the drive at the front of the house: obviously it was the screen that had registered my approach.

The other was just a blank, illuminated rectangle, at first. Then suddenly it glowed with extraordinary brilliance, faded to greyness, then glowed, faded, glowed, faded regularly, like the beam from a lighthouse.

A voice spoke dictatorially from it: "Attention, everybody. Watch this screen, watch this screen . . ."

It was hard to avoid doing so. The rhythmic beat of the light seemed to draw me to it, like a moth to the candle-flame. The room, Sarah, things on the periphery of my field of vision, became blurred and dissolved away. There was nothing left but this fierce pulsation of light, dominating my attention.

The same peremptory voice said: "You will now raise your right arm above your head."

I felt my right arm lifting automatically.

And then my conscious self rebelled. I felt angry resentment at the unequivocal tone of that voice, at its implication that I was a mere puppet.

The spell broke. "Like hell I will!" I growled, and thrust my hands deep in my pockets.

The voice continued: "If you are with other people, note those who have *not* raised their arms. They are enemies of the country. Report them to the police at once. If possible, detain them by force and send for the police. That is all. Drop your arms now."

The glow faded, and this time the screen remained grey. I swung round to Sarah. "What was that all about?"

She looked at me thoughtfully and now without hostility. I imagined I detected, for the first time, a hint of respect in her eyes.

She said, quietly: "That was the general transmission I told you about. It was an experiment in mass hypnosis. Like myself, however, you're impervious to hypnosis. You passed the test—alpha plus. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Was that all you wanted me for?"

"Yes. You can go home now."

She pressed one of the desk buttons and I heard the door lock click open. She pressed another button and with a faint whirr a tray bearing a whisky decanter, a soda syphon, and several glasses surfaced on the desk.

She poured herself a tot and tossed it down neat.

"Goodbye, Magellan."

But now that I could walk out, I perversely chose to linger. "Your hospitality is pretty rugged, Sarah. You might at least offer me one for the road."

She poured herself another. "In this hard world you've got to learn to help yourself—didn't I make that clear either?"

"All right, then," I said, and helped myself. But I don't enjoy whisky straight and squirted in a fair splash of soda.

"To our better acquaintance," I said, and took a gulp. It wasn't a big gulp but it was enough. It was like taking a hearty sniff at ammonia salts. Something solid seemed to jolt against my brain from underneath. My nostrils and mouth burned and my eyes streamed. I reeled back, dropping the glass.

Blinded by tears, I stumbled about trying to find the door. But I'd lost all sense of direction. My groping hand met a hard smooth surface. I rubbed my tortured eyes and saw blurrily that I was right up against the window.

I tried to turn away—and couldn't. Paralysis hit me with the suddenness of a stroke. If it hadn't been for the wide window sill before me I should have toppled to the floor as stiffly as a felled tree. As it was, I lay rigidly against it staring involuntarily out through the clearplast. To anyone in the garden I should have looked like a tailor's wax dummy behind a shop window.

But there wasn't anyone on those great treeless lawns.

Sarah spoke behind me, harshly and cynically. "The initial effect of curare is very odd. It paralyses the body completely, yet leaves the brain working unimpaired. I've always thought it criminal to ruin good whisky with gas-water. Appalling taste! So I arrange



for such criminals to get paralytic on the soda instead of the whisky. Poetic justice."

I was in no condition to discuss my symptoms but I could scarcely have agreed that my brain was working unimpaired. It felt pretty punch drunk to me.

But I was aware that curare was a fatal poison. Well, I wasn't over fond of this press-button world, but this was a shockingly sudden way to quit it. It was like stepping off a curb and discovering that actually you'd stepped off the parapet of the Empire State Building.

Murdered by their crackpot agent, I was going to have to leave this world to the insidious, unromantic buccaneers from deep space, after all. Damn their little yellow hides!

One of them must have stolen—silently, as usual—into the room. I heard his detestable voice fluting. "So it didn't take, Sarah?"

Black clouds were beginning to roll across my mind, blotting out perception. Only in snatches did I hear Sarah replying. Dazed as I was, bitterness yet stung me to hear that special calm sweetness she reserved for the *Makkees*: the voice that went with the face of

an angel and masked the heart that was as false as both of them.

She called this creature, phonetically, "Drahk".

Intermittently, between ever more rapid mental blackouts, I heard Drahk whistling away to her. "Things are moving now more likely than not a charlatan psychical research have heard interesting reports no time to investigate now the western concentration centre . . ."

The garden beyond the window was as swimmy as a view of the seabed. A huge round black shadow was appearing on it which I assumed to be a projection from my own darkening mind. But it wasn't.

Something like a gigantic humming top lowered itself vertically from the sky into the pool of its own shadow on the lawns. It appeared to me to be spinning, but that must have been an illusion: it was my head that was spinning. There was a row of ports along the rim of the thing and a bulbous protuberance on top like the knob of a kettle-lid.

I just had time to register the fact that I was seeing my first flying saucer. Then I had a blackout from which I didn't emerge for a long, long time.

When I did, it was some other day in some other place.

What day exactly, I'll never know. The place was a small white-tiled cell.

I was lying flat on my back on a straw palliasse that somehow was five feet or more from the floor. I sat up and looked around. My head was clear but I was terribly thirsty and hungry. For a man who'd been poisoned to death, I felt remarkably fit.

There was a single window, small and square, set so high up the wall that one couldn't see out of it. There was a cubicle with a toilet, a door with a grille in it, a bench with a cut loaf and a tin mug on it, and in the corner a wash-basin. The faucet over the latter looked to me like an oasis in a desert. I licked my dry lips and started for it.

I began to lower myself from my high perch. My dangling feet sought the floor or any handy intermediate vantage point. My right foot found a stepping stone of sorts. It was softish but seemed firm, and I let my weight rest on it as I stepped down to the floor.

Then I learned I wasn't alone. My bed was only an upper berth set in a wooden frame. The occupant of the bed beneath was sitting up slowly, rubbing his reddening right ear. I had trodden on that side of his face.

He was a young, blond fellow. He seemed only mildly annoyed

as he said in university-acquired tones: "If you imagine I'm going to turn the other cheek, you're making a bad mistake."

I apologised, sincerely because I was still wearing my shoes, briefly because I was damned thirsty. I filled the tin mug at the tap and drained it twice. Then I tore a lump off the loaf and chewed like a cannibal who hadn't seen a fellow-man, dead or alive, for a month.

"Where the devil are we?" I asked with my mouth full.

"Dartmoor," said the young fellow, with a sigh. "My old man always said I'd end up here."

I stopped chewing. "You mean the prison?"

He nodded.

"Good lord—I thought this dump had been demolished years ago."

"Oh, no. They preserved it as a historical building, to show what a wicked world it used to be once upon a time."

"H'm. It still is, believe me. How did I get here?"

"On a stretcher. Unconscious. How you got that way you should know better than I."

"How did *you* get here?"

"By putting one foot in front of the other, with a needle-gun in my back."

"Who was carrying the gun—a Makkee?"

"A *what*?"

He hadn't heard of the Makkees. I said: "Let's swap stories. You start."

His story was simple enough. He was staying with friends in Exeter—"Tom Whitaker and his wife, Anne—known 'em for ten years at least. A few days ago the three of us were in their lounge watching TV—some song and dance show or other. The picture started to wobble and the brightness to fade and then became over-bright, I thought it was a 'plane approaching directly overhead, but it wasn't. The picture went altogether but this queer brightness trouble increased to a degree you'd scarcely credit—"

"I would," I interrupted. "I saw it too. You didn't raise your hand?"

"Of course not. I was baffled. I turned to Tom, saying 'What sort of gag is this?' And there he and Anne were sitting with their arms raised like a couple of kids in a schoolroom. They had a sort of glazed look in their eyes."

"Hypnotised," I said.

"So I gathered. I couldn't get any sense out of them after that. They wouldn't talk to me. Tom visaphoned for the police.

I got to hell out of it and headed back for London in my car. At least, I pressed the buttons that should have directed the car to London automatically. A couple of miles from Honiton the car suddenly developed a mind of its own and wheeled back in a semi-circle towards Dartmoor. I tried to stop it. None of the manual controls would work any more. I tried to jump out, but the doors had somehow locked themselves. Even the windows wouldn't wind down. Obviously the car was under some sort of remote control. I still don't get it."

"It was the working of built-in mechanisms," I said. "But even the men who designed the car didn't realise they were double-purpose mechanisms. Through automation we've all built our own rat-trap and got shut inside it. I'll explain later. Go on."

"There's not much more. The car headed across the Moor straight for the prison. I noticed three or four other cars following me a mile or so back. Probably they were other automatic tumbrils conveying their victims here. But I didn't have a chance to find out. As soon as my car rolled through the main gate a couple of men jumped on the running-board. The car stopped for them, all right, and the doors opened for them, too."

"Did they look hypnotised?"

"Yes, they had that same dopey look. I didn't think I'd get far arguing with them, but I tried. Not for long, though. One of them jammed a needle-gun against my spine, and looked crazy enough to have pulled the trigger. He marched me into this cell. I've not been outside since. We get no exercise."

"But they come and feed you?"

He laughed ruefully. "Nobody comes. The bread comes through the chute, the water comes through the tap. And that's all there is. Punishment diet."

"Were the men in any sort of uniform?"

"No, just lounge suits. They looked like a couple of civil servants."

"Maybe they were," I said. "Hypnotised stooges straight from Whitehall, sent by the Makkees in advance—they planned it well. Have you seen any skinny little yellow men around?"

"No. I've seen nobody except the two men I mentioned and another two fish-eyed stretcher bearers who dumped you in here and never returned. I think there must be other prisoners here, maybe quite a number. But the field of vision beyond that door grille is very narrow and I've never seen anyone cross it."

I looked and he was right. The door was thick. The metal grille

was clamped over this side of the small aperture and a pane of clearplast was fitted over the far side. I could glimpse another cell door, opposite but distant, as though it were at the far end of an ill-lit room of which I couldn't see the floor. That was about all.

"I've shouted myself hoarse through it," said the young fellow. "If anyone heard, no one cared."

"Clearplast is sound-proof," I said. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Butler—Peter Butler. What's yours?"

"My name is Charles Wallace Magellan, which sounds the kind of name that ought to mean something . . ."

It made quite a story. Even as I told it I was tempted to call myself a liar. Butler was more credulous but even he gagged a bit over Sarah Masters.

"Ye gods, if she's really like that                   What a model she'd make!"

"Model?"

"I'm a painter of sorts. Mostly for my own amusement."

"H'm. You don't happen to have a palette-knife on you, by any chance?"

"Good grief, no. Why?"

"If I had a long thin blade I could beat that type of door lock. My dad showed me how. I'm damned if I'm going to sit here living on bread and water while the Makkees help themselves to our whole world. I might be able to work the trick with a large penknife . . ."

I looked at Butler hopefully.

"Sorry, Charles."

"Oh, well." I cursed myself for not carrying a penknife either, and then began to look around for a makeshift substitute. Peter Butler said: "Afraid you're wasting your time. This room's as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard."

He was right again. Foxed, I began heaving at the two-tiered bed-frame.

"What now?" asked Butler.

"Let's get it under the window, climb up, and take a look outside."

"But that thing isn't tall enough."

"Were you a born defeatist, Pete, or did the university ~~do~~ that to you?"

He looked hurt, then grim. He flung himself at the bed and dragged it almost single-handed beneath the window. I bent both paliasses double and piled one on top of the other on the upper

shelf. Then, like a Chinese acrobat, I mounted the shaky heap. On tiptoe, I could just raise my nose to the window-ledge and peep out through the inevitable clearplast.

We were several floors up and I had a fair view of the prison yard and the moorland stretching beyond to the horizon. There wasn't a soul in sight. My mind remained as empty as the landscape. I could see no escape via the window: it was too small even for me to wriggle through, and in any case clearplast was unsmashable.

I climbed down, and chewed a bit more bread thoughtfully. In my time I had materialised Richard the Lionheart, complete with his crusader's sword. But now I couldn't materialise even one penknife. What to do?

Pete got tired of watching me chewing things over physically and mentally, and peered restlessly through the door grille.

"I say," he remarked, presently, "I think there's someone in that other cell. I could swear I saw a face looking out. But it's hard to see at this distance."

I took a look. The light was very poor inside the prison. The other door was way off, and there was a hindering reflection from the clearplast. Even a hawk might have had trouble descrying another hawk beyond that far window. I looked hard and long and decided there *was* a vague shape moving there.

"A fellow prisoner—perhaps more than one," I commented. "I reckon there must be quite a few here now. The Makkee, Drahk, said something about the western concentration centre. Obviously, Dartmoor is it. All the other people who couldn't be hypnotised, and might therefore give trouble, will be herded in here. Somehow we've got to get in touch with 'em."

"I was never any great shakes at telepathy," said Butler.

I searched my empty pockets again. There was still no knife, and certainly no radio transmitter. Not even a fountain pen or pencil. I'd so wanted to make a good impression on Sarah Masters that I'd changed into my best suit to keep the appointment with her. I hadn't stopped to transfer any of the knick-knacks which usually cluttered my pockets.

Then I noticed the starched white handkerchief I'd so carefully arranged, three corners showing, in my breast pocket, to look my sartorial best. It was rather crumpled now but not too grubby. I opened it out. Its square was about the same size as the door grille and an idea clicked into life in my mind.

I hung the handkerchief over the grille, raised it, dropped

it, raised it again, as though it were a sort of window blind gone mad.

Pete thought it was I who'd gone mad. I answered his startled expression. "Semaphore. The other fellow mightn't be able to distinguish my rosy cheeks, but he ought to be able to see this handkerchief."

"Well done, old man!" Butler applauded as though I'd just made my century.

The man in the other cell was rather quicker-witted than poor Pete. He caught on at once, and responded. His handkerchief wasn't as clean as mine but it was visible. We flapped at each other for a bit, and then I got down to serious work.

For my fake mind-reading acts I had memorised several codes, among them the near-forgotten Morse code: my accomplice and I had often found it useful.

I let the handkerchief hang down over the grille for three seconds. That meant a dash. A mere dip and snatch ~~up~~ meant a dot. I signalled A-R-E Y-O-U A-L-O-N-E and waited, incredibly optimistically, for an answer.

The other fellow signalled only aimlessly back. He didn't know the Morse code. Neither did Pete. He'd never heard of it.

I stuffed my handkerchief back in my pocket and attacked the last of the loaf savagely. "Only one thing for it," I growled. "If we're going to get anywhere, I've got to teach that other fellow the code first."

And I did it. I kept sending a dot immediately followed by a dash until at last the other man divined I wished it repeated back to me. Then I proceeded to send "B". After some hesitation my wondering pupil copied me.

Somewhere about "H" he cottoned on to the fact that I was going through the alphabet, and flapped "A" (which luckily he remembered) a few times as a hint that he wanted to go back to the beginning. I complied.

Obviously this time he or a companion was noting down the dot-dash combination for each letter, for there was a pause after "Z" and then I got my first slow, shaky message: "Who are you?"

I told him, even more slowly, for I knew he'd have to search his list to identify each letter.

I learnt he was Gerald Scott, and he'd been there two days in company with another man named Watts. They were both wondering why everyone had gone crazy, what it was all about, and were dead eager for news.

Instead of satisfying them, I signalled: "Have you a knife of any kind?"

Watts—who turned out to be a gardener—had a sizeable clasp-knife. I feared that the blade would be too thick for my purpose. Nevertheless, I began passing instructions for its employment in springing the lock on their door, for the odds were that the lock was a standard type just like ours. As an incentive I told them I'd give them the whole story, verbally, just as soon as we could get together.

I didn't get far with the instructions. It was a dull day and evening came early. The light became too bad to make out signals and no artificial lights came on in the prison.

I was glad to rest my tired arms, anyway. Fatigue and frustration made me irritable. When Pete began to wonder audibly what the Makkees would do with us, I snapped: "You should be asking what we'll do with *them*."

He shut up, and we went to bed in silence. In the darkness a loaf thumped through the chute. Did that prove there was at least one button-pressing keeper on duty? More likely the food supply was entirely automatic.

I slept poorly. Despite my crushing remark to Pete, I spent half my waking hours wondering what the Makkees would do with us. The other half I wondered about Sarah. What was she doing now? I presumed she'd already confiscated my coveted house. Perhaps she was even now going curiously through my boxes of tricks, my gadgets to make tables float and luminous trumpets speak. I sweated at the thought of her reading my notebook and diaries. Some of my frauds were pretty mean.

Yet—who was she to condemn me? We were two of a kind. We had both taken our revenge on society by tricking it and using it.

The difference was that she was still doing it, on a far greater scale than I'd attempted to do. And now I'd allied myself with that same gullible society against the much more poisonous Makkees, and she'd ranged herself against me.

But my thoughts weren't confined to ethics. The old Adam wouldn't stay out of it. On that level anyway, I was helplessly in love with her.

I'd have to see her again if I had to fight my way to London alone.

I got to sleep at last. Soon afterwards, Pete awakened me. It was morning.

"Our friends across the way are trying to attract your attention. Why didn't you teach me the code?"

"If you had any *nous* at all, you'd have picked it up too."

He was chagrined. I pushed him aside and resumed signalling. An hour or so later I saw with delight that other door swing open. Two men emerged, vanished, then soon a face peered through the grille. It was as round as the grille was square, a beaming full moon of a face. Cross belied his name: he always enjoyed life.

The thick door and the clearplast remained obstinate barriers to verbal conversation. Preposterously, we had still to communicate by flapping handkerchief, although only a few inches apart. But not for long. Cross quickly absorbed the technique of mastering the locked door from outside. Watts assisted. Soon our cell contained a talkative quartet.

Unlike the beefy, alert Cross, Watts was slight, wiry, and slow-thinking. I deduced there was no single common quality of character or mental strength which gave us immunity against hypnotism. We had nothing to congratulate ourselves about. We were merely freaks.

But we did share the urgent desire to escape. Over a bread and water breakfast, we began to plan the breakout.

The whole thing turned out to be too easy. Our captors had been instructed to lock us in cells, but seemingly their orders ended there. These hypnotised types—"zombies", we called them—were apparently incapable of caring what became of us, and for all the Makkees cared either we could rot to death.

We ventured forth cautiously at first, our only weapon the clasp-knife. Our cell was at the end of a long gallery, with cat-walks, iron spiral stairways, and rows of cells along either side. Cross's cell was right at the far end, and there was a well of emptiness, four floors deep, between us and it.

No one was in sight, and we became bolder. We found almost every cell in the gallery occupied by one or two men. We freed the lot. It took time, but we acquired several more knives as we went along, and Cross and I showed the others how to use them. It was easy once you'd learned the trick, but it had taken my father a month to hit on it.

As the day wore on, we became a crowd. The larger it grew, the noisier and more confident it became. There was a feeling of safety in numbers.

There was a tough gate of steel bars to negotiate at the end of the gallery. It wrung an hour's sweat out of me. But father's

training won. We thronged through, into another gallery. Our numbers were doubled when we broke free from that, and then we came across the female ward.

After that, the multitude became *very* noisy, and anyone anywhere in the prison must have heard us.

I led the way down a broad main corridor, knife in hand, determined to use it on anyone who tried to stop me. Nobody tried. We poured through the wide reception hall and through the doors on to the large concrete expanse of the prison yard. We were yelling like kids let out of school.

The high boundary wall still stood between us and complete freedom, and the great main gate was shut and barred. I was content to leave it so for the time being. I didn't consider it insuperable. I just didn't want everyone to rush out and straggle away over the moor, especially as it was now past sunset and they'd only get lost in the dark. I wanted to get us organised.

I waited till everyone was out in the yard. Then I climbed on to a ledge of the main gate.

"Friends," I boomed, "we're all in the same boat and you're wondering just what crazy kind of a boat it is. I'll tell you. I want you to realise what we're up against, why we can't all go off on our separate ways. If we do, we'll just end up in jail again. We've got to band together, like an army. We've got to secure food, transport, weapons. Our old world, our old life, has gone. We'll have to fight hard to keep the freedom we've just won."

Then I told them, in the thickening dusk, about the Makkees.

They hung on my every word. I found myself listening to myself with interest too. I hadn't realised before my oratorical gifts. It gave me a gratifying sense of power, boosted by the fact that the crowd seemed anxious to make me its leader.

I felt like Napoleon addressing his troops on the plains of Austerlitz. In another ten minutes I should similarly be exhorting my followers to name their children after me.

Those ten minutes weren't allowed me. High up on the prison roof there appeared a small figure wrapped up like an arctic explorer, with a thin yellow face clamped between ear-muffs. Four zombies flanked him on the parapet, carrying things that looked like disconnected car headlights. They stood in a row against the dulling sky.

I pointed dramatically up. "Look up there, friends! That's a Makkee. Go—drag him down."

The crowd wheeled round with a yell. Immediately, it became

a yell of pain and I was yelling with the rest. For the Makkee raised a hand and the zombies raised the objects they carried. Four wide-spreading pale green beams of light played over us.

I came off my perch like a shot bird and writhed on the unsympathetic concrete with my erstwhile followers. Just how the vibrations of those rays affected the human spinal cord remains an unsolved scientific mystery. Under their influence one's nervous system becomes a web of glowing hot wire, every muscle contracts into a hard lump of pain.

Five seconds, each one an age. Then the green light ceased, and we were free to massage our poor cramped bodies—if we had the strength to. It was like surviving the electric chair.

Cross's bulky figure lay next to me. My throat was still constricted, but I managed a murmur. "I'll get that devil soon as it's properly dark."

He gasped: "I'll come with you."

Presently, I told everyone nearby to remain where they were and to pass the instruction on. As night fell and I could no longer discern the five on the roof, I began crawling round the outskirts of the recumbent crowd, Cross at my heels. We were making a circuit to the prison entrance. My rough plan was to gain the roof and surprise the Makkee from behind.

Again it was I who got the nasty surprise.

A pale green beam smote down and caught Cross and me and all near us in its focus. More paralysis and unendurable agony. This time I passed right out.

When I came to, the stars were out overhead. I doubt if I'd ever felt more miserable in my life. Sarah's potion had been paralyzing, too, but it had lacked this awful, spirit-crushing pain.

I'd learnt, the hard way, that the Makkees could see in the dark with those peculiar black eyes of theirs. I felt horribly helpless lying there, seen but unseeing, knowing that another attempt to move would only invite a third wave of that terrible pain, and that my followers would suffer too.

My followers? Were they that any longer?

Surely I'd lost their confidence now. I'd been humiliated before them and brought humiliation to them also. A wild rage came over me. I could have slain every Makkee in existence. I even felt murderous towards Sarah, their abettor.

The bitter night dragged on. The people began to speak among themselves again. A hand touched my ankle. It was Peter Butler.

"Charles," he whispered, "don't give up. We're all with you."

I was moved. And surprised. To hear this from Pete, whom I'd accused of lack of resource, perhaps rightly, and lack of guts, obviously wrongly.

Cross became more like his old, cheerful self again, and soon we were conspiring quietly. Something must be attempted when daylight came and we were no longer at a disadvantage visually.

We were still debating as dawn neared, but before it broke strange things happened and events were decided for us.

Somewhere in the sky out over the moor a greenish glow grew. It was a familiar green and as it brightened we nerved ourselves for the shock of pain. But although our nerves tingled and our muscles twitched, the source was too distant to paralyse us. We stared at it apprehensively. The glow seemed to emanate from a number of faint pinpoints moving in the sky.

We had hardly a chance to speculate before something resembling a sheaf of dazzlingly bright rockets shot across the sky, coming from the west. The green pinpoints began to fly before them. But the rockets, like intelligent comets, pursued and overtook them.

Came a rapid succession of eye-dazzling flashes in the sky. A comet died at each flash. So did its victim, a green point. Then only starlight remained. That faded as we all talked excitedly, guessing wildly at the meaning of this new phenomena.

Generally it was agreed that the pinpoints had been flying saucers, belonging to the Makkees. A lot of people, I learned, had seen flying saucers of late. And, of course, I had seen that one at Hampstead myself.

But who had destroyed them?

Somewhere there was somebody on our side, and a powerful somebody.

Dawn came. The Makkee and his zombies were still on the roof, but now they were crouching behind the parapet so that only their heads showed occasionally. From the Makkee's behaviour it was obvious that he could still see where we could not see. He was watching something out on the moor, hidden from us by the tall boundary wall.

Suddenly there was an almighty explosion. A thousand fragments whirred through the air—luckily mostly skyward. The massive main gate collapsed into a pile of stone-dust and twisted metal. As the dust cloud subsided, we were amazed to see men beyond.

They looked just as amazed to discover the crowd of us thronging the yard.

They began to advance cautiously.

I yelled and waved my arms. "Go back, go back!"

They hesitated. Then what I feared happened. The green beams, barely visible in the daylight, shot down from the roof and caught them and turned them into writhing figures on the ground.

I cursed and shook my fist at the Makkee. But he wasn't watching us. His attention was still on something distant. We stared in that direction, through the big gap in the wall, and saw miles away on the moor a scattering of tents. It looked like a military encampment, and it put new life and hope into me.

I shouted aloud: "We're not alone, folk! That's our side, out there. They're trying to rescue us."

That brought the Makkee's attention back to me. I wisely shut up. No sense in asking to be put out of action again.

But what act could we perform, anyway, to help?

Once again events took control. From the distant camp a peculiar large vehicle began to head towards us, not fast but steadily. It didn't follow the road but came straight across the grassland.

"What on earth is it?" asked Pete.

Pretty soon, I could answer. "It's a tank—a fighting vehicle left over from the last war. A real museum piece. Wonder where they dug it up?"

"What good can it do?"

"It can shell from a distance. Unfortunately, we're part of the target."

We went on watching, between curiosity and anxiety. The Makkee watched too. The tank made straight for the gap. The men there crawled painfully out of its path and got behind the wall.

On came the clumsy metal monster, its turret hatch shut, its long gun pointing stiffly ahead of it. It crunched across the rubble that had been the gate. Then the zombies, acting on an order, stood up and aimed their ray-emitters. Four faint beams converged on the tank. It trundled on, its engine roaring.

The crowd parted hastily, leaving a ragged lane for it. The rays followed it without visible effect, though paralysing the unfortunates on the fringes of the lane.

Perhaps the occupants of the tank were paralysed, too, and couldn't halt it. On the other hand, perhaps

I took a mad chance. Despite my aching limbs I ran round to the back of the tank. There was a sort of rack there, slung half



underneath, and I crammed myself into it, stealing a ride. The rays playing on the front of the tank didn't affect me at all. The gamble had come off: the rays couldn't penetrate solid steel.

In a minute there was a crash and the tank jarred to a stop. Smashed bricks came dropping all around. The tank had bulldozed its way into the wide reception hall, carrying the doors with it. The green rays couldn't touch it now.

The hatch clanged open and a man climbed out. He was in his sixties, spare, had tired blue eyes and looked sad. He glanced at me and said nothing. Then he called down through the hatch: "All right, Junior, we're in. Tell 'em. And tell 'em to send a hundred men in trucks with scaling ladders to surround the whole dump. They're to set the ladders against the boundary wall. There are Makkees on the roof with ray-guns. Our boys' job is to snipe 'em from the tops of the ladders, using the wall as a shield. It should be thick enough to block the rays. They're not to expose themselves. Just bob up, snap shoot, bob down again. Meanwhile, we'll see what we can do from inside."

I heard a muffled voice within the tank repeating the orders over a radio.

The old man turned to me. "I'm Major Brewster, commanding that bunch back there. What's the set-up here?"

I told him, concisely. He already knew about the paralysing rays. "We had a bellyful of them ourselves during the night. But they're only effective in the open. They haven't much penetrating power. A suit of armour could probably stop them."

Another oldish man climbed out of the tank. "This is Junior, otherwise Captain Madden, my understrapper," said Brewster.

"What a way to run an army," I said.

Brewster stiffened. "What do you mean by that?"

"Supposing you'd both been killed in that tank. Your army would have become leaderless. An army without a leader is a rabble. Napoleon wouldn't have been so foolish. He'd have sent somebody else."

Madden grinned, but Brewster said harshly: "I seem to recall that Napoleon single-handedly rushed the bridge over the Alpone when his troops couldn't get past the Austrians."

"*Touché*," I said.

Madden said: "One war at a time. Just now we're fighting the Makkees."

"True," I said. "But I think there's only one Makkee here. Come on." I started leading the way to the roof. I heard Brewster grumbling: "We've got to watch this chap or he'll be running the whole show. Damn all people with the Napoleon complex!"

The next battle was brief and the end unexpected. We were at a disadvantage on the open roof: the Makkee could sweep it with the rays. We had to use the chimney-stacks as cover, making little rushes from one to another, trying to corner him. His attention was divided between us and the men behind the boundary wall. They kept bobbing up to take pot shots at him and he was trying to keep their heads down.

He was the sole target—Brewster yelled at his men not to shoot at the zombies, who were only unwitting tools. But the way the rifle bullets ricochetted about the roof, no-one's skin was safe.

The end came suddenly. The Makkee, obviously isolated in this area with no hope of help, could see his defeat was only a matter of time. I suppose he did the logical thing from his point of view. All at once he stepped up on to the parapet and dived off. He became a small crumpled thing on the concrete yard below.

The zombies just stood there, looking vacant, waiting for further orders that would never come. All the same, they still carried their ray-emitters and I was apprehensive of them. So I took off my hat

to Major Brewster when he walked quietly up to them. He had a queer sort of pistol in his hand but didn't threaten them with it. In turn, he gently applied it to the base of each zombie's neck. There was no sound, but at its touch each zombie fell unconscious.

Madden explained to me: "That's a circuit-breaker. It breaks the closed ring of hypnotic suggestion in their minds. Shock treatment. But it only knocks them out *pro tem.* It's our chief weapon in the battle against the Makkees. In time, we'll recover all the people the Makkees hypnotised."

"A most useful weapon. I'd like it for my army."

Madden stared at me coldly. "There's only one army—that's the human race. There's no place for private armies."

"Let's talk it over," I said.

Naturally, there was a full-dress palaver after that. Peter, Cross and Watts were in on it, too, and it went on most of the day. Brewster and Madden were drinking men. There was a large stock of beer at their camp. It wasn't quite so large when the palaver ended. Neither was my head. I'd learnt a lot and found I wasn't the only fish in the sea.

Madden and Brewster had been campaigning against the Makkees for some days before I got into the fight. They too were impervious to hypnotism and had likewise been hunted. They found temporary refuge on an island off Cornwall, which turned out to be the lair of a lost and dying explorer from another planet on the far side of our galaxy.

They'd named him "Prospero".\*

He was two thousand years old, humanoid, coal-black, cynical, and a master of strange science. He had been indifferent to the fate of the human race but they'd won him over.

He refused to leave his island-fortress, for he expected to die at any moment. But his influence could still be felt. The army which Brewster and Madden had mustered was attacked by Makkees in flying saucers on the open moor last night. Those were the green pinpoints we'd seen in the sky. They were raying the exposed army. Unexpectedly, Prospero took a hand from the distant island, and shot down the saucers with some kind of guided missiles.

"How did he know what was going on?" I asked.

Madden shrugged. "His science is far superior to ours, even to the Makkees'. He has masses of strange apparatus on his island, including even a buried spaceship. He can do a lot by remote con-

\* See Against Goliath (NEBULA No. 23).

trol, but I think we'll soon be moving out of his range. Pretty certainly we'll have to take London without help."

Brewster said optimistically: "There may not be much resistance by then. I think the Makkee vanguard was numerically very small to begin with. It must have lost a fair percentage of its personnel in those saucers last night."

"The nucleus of them you'll find in Hampstead," I said, and told my own story. I skipped lightly over the prison break-out but Peter and Cross insisted on emphasising my part in it till I all but blushed.

Brewster looked at me thoughtfully afterwards, then said: "You're an odd character, Magellan, but obviously a natural leader, the kind we're looking for. We need reliable officers. We raided the prison because we'd heard the hypnosis-resistant types were confined there. Most of our own men are ex-zombies who we released from the spell. Trouble is there's always the chance the Makkees may get at 'em again somehow. The thought doesn't conduce to a good night's sleep. We've got to have a strong core of officers who are impervious. Men like you, Cross, Butler and Watts here."

"I intended to return to London, anyway, with my own army, if possible," I said. "Of course, I've never held a command in a real shooting war, unlike you and Captain Madden. All the same, I've studied battle tactics, especially Napoleon's. I'll make a proposition. My army, as officers, will command yours. But I'll be only third in command, under you and the Captain."

"That's reasonable," said Brewster. "In fact, just what I wanted. Have another beer."

Next day began the series of battles along the road to London whose names are now history: Chard, Sherborne, Salisbury, Stockbridge, Basingstoke . . . So far as possible we tried to avoid battle in open country. Our chosen ground had plenty of brick walls on it for protection against the green rays. A town or townlet was ideal.

We had to cut our way through whole masses of zombies. Only a few of them had ray-guns—obviously the Makkees hadn't counted on any real resistance. There was a scattering of artillery and firearms, museum relics like our own, but mostly the zombies had such sharp or blunt makeshift instruments as came to hand.

The aerial warfare was completely one-sided. No serviceable bombers or fighter planes existed. But we suffered aerial bombardment from the Makkees. Their flying saucers came skimming low,

spouting things like white-hot harpoons which exploded with fearsome effect.

They caught Madden with one on Salisbury Plain.

Brewster, a friend of Madden's since boyhood, took his revenge in Salisbury itself when he swooped on the Makkee HQ there and shot a whole dozen of the little yellow men out of hand. He was mad with grief and reckless with it. He was shot to pieces on the road to Stockbridge, charging a machine-gun nest.

So I was in command when we took Stockbridge. I'll always reckon it the most classic of my battles: a double feint and then an overwhelming attack from an unexpected quarter. Although my troops were numerically inferior, like Napoleon I always arranged to outnumber the enemy on my particular chosen battle-ground.

We'd been systematically smashing the complex web of automation spread over the country, which Madden and Brewster called "Goliath". TV stations were demolished—we wanted no more mass hypnotism at the rear of our advancing army.

In short, it was a scorched earth policy. Our ultimate aim was to make our planet a wilderness so far as the comfort-loving Makkees were concerned, so that the main body of colonists, still presumably somewhere far out in space, might turn aside and make for more promising and less spiky pastures.

As for the human race, it had been feather-bedded too long. A period in the wilderness should be good for its enfeebled soul.

When the flying saucers were thickest, Prospero's flaming arrows would hurtle from over the western horizon and destroy them. But after Salisbury we rarely saw a flying saucer and never again one of Prospero's missiles. Assistance from him ceased altogether. I supposed that either we had moved beyond his range or else he was dead.

So at Stockbridge I was on my own, so to speak, though with sterling support from Gerry Cross, Peter Butler, and the taciturn Watts. Watts, unfortunately, had a grenade to himself at Bagshot. He saw it coming but was too slow to dodge. Yet he'd been an able officer. He'd moved and thought slowly, but seldom along the wrong lines.

We tried to capture zombies rather than kill them, though naturally self-preservation caused us to kill plenty. I regretted it bitterly, but they were in a sense dead already.

We set free the enslaved minds of those we captured and they became members of our ever-growing army. The circuit-breaker was one of Prospero's inventions, given with his blessing to the

human race, which he half derided, half admired. I had one for my personal use. Sometimes I fingered it and wondered whether it had the power to break up the neurotic patterns that had warped Sarah's mind.

She was more and more in my thoughts as we drew near London. Women had meant little to me before that one shattering encounter with her. Hate and love are two sides of a coin, and that coin was spinning constantly in my heart. I didn't know whether I wanted to kill her or kiss her. One thing I did know: I had to see her again.

We crossed the Thames at Windsor and wheeled to approach London from the north-west, aiming at Hampstead. We came to Harrow in the mist of evening and camped for the night, planning to launch an all-out attack on Hampstead at dawn.

Only—dawn never came.

It had been a cloudy, moonless night and very dark. The mist had thickened into a palpable fog. I cursed the unseasonable weather, and went to bed.

I awoke sometime in the small hours, breaking free from an awful nightmare in which once more I stood paralysed by the window in Sarah's room. And I could see the black shadow of the flying saucer growing over the garden as the thing descended. But now it wasn't coming down in the garden. It was landing on the roof, breaking its way down through the floors, through the ceiling above me, to crush me as I stood helpless, unable to run.

Yet somehow too I was Richard III in his fear-haunted tent on the eve of the battle in which he met his bloody end.

*The lights burn blue—It is now dead midnight.  
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh .*

I could certainly feel the cold drops on my trembling flesh. The room was pitch-black. I reached out and snapped on the electric lights.

Then I gave a little shriek.

The lights burned blue.

A very dark blue, almost purple. The room was full of black fog, so thick that I could scarcely see the foot of the bed and the far wall not at all. It was as though someone had just discharged a huge sack of soot into the room.

I groped around for my clothes and dressed. I was still shaking. There was that abounding hush that comes in a thick fog. I

seized a torch. It gave a dim blue light that hardly helped at all. I got to the window and peered out into blackness. The fog was everywhere.

Someone came into the room, and my heart jumped. It was a dim figure, much too large for a Makkee. But it might be a zombie sent to slay me in my bed.

"Charles?" said an anxious voice. It was Gerry Cross. The relief was enormous.

"Here," I said, waving my useless torch.

He came over, cursing as he hit his knee against a bed-post.

"Something's afoot," he said. "This is no natural fog. Must be some kind of smoke-screen the Makkees have laid down on us. Damned effective. The whole army's immobilised. You can't drive a truck or a tank through this—you can't see a thing."

"It cuts both ways," I said, calmer. "They can't attack us either."

"I'm not so sure. I can't imagine them putting themselves in the dark too."

"They can see in the dark," I said.

"So can a cat. But it can't see in a fog any more than we can. Suppose the Makkees have got infra-red searchlights and special observing instruments They're wizards with radar and all that, aren't they?"

"Radar won't tell them friend from foe in the streets," I said. "And I doubt if infra-red light could get far through this."

I couldn't see Cross's expression but he still sounded doubtful. "I've got the guard alerted, anyhow."

I looked at my wristwatch. I had to stick its luminous face almost into my eye. "It's ten past three. There's little we can do before daylight, except sit it out."

We began a miserable vigil, not helped along much by the bottle of whisky we opened. At last, with a nasty sinking feeling, we realised that daylight wasn't going to come, not in these parts, at least.

I called a general meeting of officers.

"Anyone got a clue about the nature of this fog?" I asked.

A bespectacled lieutenant, Tyson, said: "Natural fogs are composed of globules of moisture formed around dust particles. There's very little moisture in this fog. It's more like smoke. But it doesn't behave like smoke, or fog, come to that. There's an intermittent breeze blowing. A gust of wind normally would drive fog or smoke into a dense bank, with a correspondingly clear patch.

This stuff, however, seems practically unaffected by the wind. It's as if each particle of it is trying to remain in its own particular place."

"That confirms it's unnatural, and therefore brewed for us by the Makkees," I said. "I suppose there's no chance of clearing patches by lighting bonfires?"

"None, I'd say," said Tyson. "I've a theory these particles are electrically charged and are being held in place by the earth's magnetic field. We dislodge them as we move, but they drift back to their respective lines of force almost immediately."

"I see," I said. "How far does the earth's magnetic field extend? I'm an ignoramus about these things."

"So are scientists, sir, largely. It extends well into space, and well below ground. I can't be more exact."

"Thanks, anyway." I pondered, then said suddenly: "Peter, weren't Brewster and Madden Old Harrovians? I seem to remember you chin-wagging with them about the old school. Did you go to Harrow too?"

"Yes I did."

"Then you know this area pretty well?"

"Very well. I could find my way about blindfold."

"Good, because that's what you'll have to do. I want you to lead me to the top of Harrow Hill."

"I doubt if that'll take you above the fog, sir," Tyson cut in. "It's probably miles thick vertically."

"Maybe," I said. "And maybe not. We'll find out. Come on, Pete."

We took powerful hand-lamps. They helped, fractionally. But I should have got lost without Peter, although I knew the general direction of the hill. I'd seen it yesterday. The crooked spire of the church on the summit was visible for many miles around.

We stumbled up the hill through the gloom, and when we reached the churchyard wall my spirits were low. The fog was as thick as ever and it seemed likely my guess was wrong. We went through the lychgate and climbed the slight rise to where the church stood. Those last few feet of elevation worked the miracle.

It was like rising to the surface of a lake of ink, the fog thinned and vanished so abruptly. All of a sudden our heads were in bright sunlight and we could see for miles across the dead level upper surface of the fog layer, although we could scarcely see our own feet.

Peter gasped: "What an amazing thing!"

"I half expected it," I said. "Let's go a bit higher."

We went into the church and climbed the tower, then peered out through a small window. It really was amazing. The sky was light blue overhead, yet to the south-east all London lay drowned, spires and all, beneath a flat calm blackness.

"They made a thorough job of it," grunted Peter.

"Yes, but they carefully left themselves out of it, as I thought they would. See there." I pointed to a distant archipelago of small wooded islands in the black sea. "Those are the heights of Hampstead. The Makkees are basking in the sunshine there while all London gropes in the darkness below them, except on a few other high points, like Shooters Hill and Sydenham Hill in the southern suburbs."

Peter surveyed the miles of fog which lay between us and Hampstead.

"They've certainly forestalled our attack. We just can't get at them. I know the north-western quarter of London pretty well but I wouldn't stake a bean on my chances of reaching Hampstead through that maze of streets in that kind of fog. But I've got an idea. Northolt Aerodrome is quite near here. I think I could make that. We could grab some passenger helicopters and—"

I was shaking my head. "The same thing would happen to us in those 'copters that happened to you in your car. They'd take control of us and dump us heaven knows where—perhaps in mid-Channel. Too risky altogether."

"You're right, Charles. But what *can* we do?"

"We could take the monorail to Hampstead—it's a direct run from Harrow-on-the-Hill Station."

"You're not serious? Surely the Makkees will have shut down the transport system?"

"You bet they have," I said, and added cryptically: "But that won't stop us from taking the monorail."

I left Peter in the dark as we descended into the more tangible dark of the fog. I had to, because my new idea was still hazy even to me. I wanted time to think it out.

There was no reason why the fog itself should have stopped any of London's transport. The monorail, above and below ground, was entirely automatic and could function in any kind of weather. Even private cars had detailed maps stored in their memory banks and could steer themselves electronically to any given destination. Radar scanners preserved them from collisions—accidents were almost impossible.

In normal circumstances there was nothing to prevent our army from piling itself into trucks and cars and driving blindly but safely through the fog to Hampstead.

But circumstances weren't normal. There was a war on.

All kinds of transport, even private cars, were part of the electronic web, Goliath, and their guiding strings were held by the Makkees. To enter a train or a car was to walk into a trap. However, the Makkees knew we weren't that dumb. The odds were they'd immobilised all transport, leaving the fog itself as the trap. For an advancing army was bound to lose cohesion in that blinding blackness, units would lose contact with each other, and separation would lead to utter disintegration.

Napoleon's main strategy was to divide the enemy troops before annihilating them. The Makkees were counting on the fog dividing us. Then, presumably, they would lift the fog suddenly and launch a zombie counter-attack against our disorganised troops.

I wasn't going to buy it.

On the way back, Pete and I stopped off at Harrow-on-the-Hill Station. Our surmise was correct. The current had been cut off and no monotrains were running.

We encountered nobody. The population of the district, either through fear or by order, was completely house-bound.

Back at HQ I called another officers' conference and between us we hammered my vague idea into a concrete plan of action.

Had Brewster still been alive he would have grinned ironically. I was doing precisely what I'd condemned him for: swanning on ahead alone into enemy territory, chancing my army being rendered leaderless. Not quite alone, though. Pete came with me.

It didn't matter that the trains weren't running. They weren't important. What was really important was the monorail on which they ran. It was an unbroken steel guide-rope directly linking our camp to the enemy's HQ. We had only to follow it, never losing touch with it.

Quite literally we kept in touch with it. The rail ran waist-high on supports the whole way. You could run your fingers along its smooth cold surface without strain as you walked. And you had to. The dense cloud of motionless particles which hung around us kept visibility down to a dim yard or so, and made funeral lights of our big hand-lamps.

I carried a circuit-breaker in one holster and a needle-gun in another. In my hand I carried a magnesium flash pistol, which we'd

found could extend the radius of our vision by quite another yard—briefly. It could be useful in an emergency, like a sudden attack.

Pete carried the field telephone, with its heavy and powerful battery. The radio and visaphone were strictly out, by my orders. I wanted nothing to go out over the air. The Makkees were the masters of the ether: they were certain to pick up our messages.

Therefore, through most of our campaigns we'd stuck to the old-fashioned field telephone. But this was a kind that could transmit even without cable. Wire fences or iron railings, for instance, could be its medium. So in yet another sense the steel rail was our lifeline. Periodically, Pete would clamp the telephone connections to it and we could speak to Cross, leading two hundred picked men two miles behind us. Cross would become supreme commander if anything happened to us.

A mass assault on Hampstead was no longer possible, but a surprise commando-style attack on the Makkee HQ might settle the issue at a blow.

But we had to feel our way there. The monorail from Harrow had been laid over the same route as the old broad-gauge Underground line, and, like it, didn't actually go underground properly until it reached West Hampstead, where it burrowed into the flank of the hill. And there an entirely new underground section had recently been added, linking West Hampstead with the Hampstead tube station itself.

The Hampstead tube station was our goal.

Pete and I plodded on, mile after mile, through darkness that would have made the banks of the Styx sunny by comparison. Awkwardly, we by-passed stationary empty trains. Once, at Neasden, we became confused over points and were almost side-tracked into goods yards.

We neither saw nor heard a sign of any living creature. It didn't make me any happier. I kept imagining silent zombie forces all around us, in some fashion aware of us, deliberately letting us through and then closing in behind us. But Cross's men, at the rear, kept reporting a similar desertedness in the near vicinity of the line.

At each station I made a point of locating the name-board and identifying it—a single flash from the magnesium pistol usually sufficed. No fear of the flash giving our position away: it couldn't be seen more than seven or eight feet from us. Each time, I reported to Cross where we were.

Thus we groped on through Willesden Green and Kilburn



to West Hampstead and the mouth of the new tunnel. There we waited for Cross and his crowd to catch up with us.

"Congratulations, Charles," he said, when he came. "That's the worst part of the journey over."

"Maybe," I said. "But somehow I'd have preferred a little opposition. Things are going too well."

Cross laughed. "I never could understand people who are afraid of their own good luck. We're having a run of good luck, that's all. Good luck in conjunction with a good military brain—the Makkees may be bright lads in their own fashion, but you out-class 'em when it comes to strategy."

I remained cautious. "Pete and I will keep a hundred yards ahead of you through the tunnel. We'll 'phone every few yards. Leave twenty men at this end as a rearguard. The rest of us will consolidate in the Hampstead tube station."

"Right," said Cross.

Pete and I set off. Being in a tunnel felt little different. It had seemed to us that we'd been walking through a black tunnel all the way from Harrow. Presently we came upon a train standing in the tunnel, providing no room for us to squeeze past it. But it was

no real obstacle. We simply climbed through the door at the back and fumbled our way through the communicating doors along the whole length of the train and so out through the front. Still, we 'phoned back to Cross and warned him that the train was there.

At last we emerged into Hampstead tube station. All was silent. We scrambled up on to a platform.

And then our "run of good luck" abruptly ended.

A faint rumbling came from the tunnel mouth behind us. A horrible fear-spasm shot through me. I imagined the Makkees had switched on the power and the train had begun to move through the tunnel, mowing down Cross and his men. But the rumbling was brief and ended very suddenly.

Pete was gripping my wrist hard. "What was that?" he whispered.

I didn't answer. I swung down from the platform and felt my way back to the tunnel mouth. I could go no farther. Something solid was blocking the way. Pete joined me and we investigated. A massive metal door had somehow slid or swung into place, completely sealing off the tunnel.

I thumped at it. It gave a flat, dead sound and bruised my fist.

Pete said: "They can get out through the other end. But can we get out at *this* end?"

"If we can, we'll find a reception committee waiting," I said, bitterly. "This is just too nicely timed. Well, we'll never accomplish anything by remaining here. We might just as well go out and meet them. I hope Drahk is one of them. If I can put an electric needle through him, it'll help our side a lot. He's the master mind."

We returned to the platform, I with the magnesium pistol in one hand and the needle-gun in the other. At least I was on my home ground now. I'd used this station a thousand times and knew all its corners. But as we progressed we found nobody hiding in them. The station appeared to be deserted.

We climbed the stairs round the lift shaft, which was still the deepest lift shaft in any London tube station. Right near the top we emerged into daylight, to which we'd become so unused that it dazzled us. We paused while our eyes adjusted themselves. Then—how wonderful it was to be able to see again!

A lot of my tension eased and I realised just how hard I'd been fighting the old fear of the dark and what it might conceal. I feared much less an enemy I could see.

But still there was no enemy to see.

The High Street was as bare as though it were a Sabbath dawn. Heath Street contained only clean air and sunlight. This area of Hampstead seemed totally depopulated.

We hesitated at the tube station entrance. We hated to leave Cross and the others shut off in the darkness deep in the ground. But I said: "The only way we can open that door is to capture the person who shut it. I've a good notion of where we'll find him."

We climbed towards the Heath and the road I had lived in. Away to our left we could look down on the vast black cloud that had engulfed London, an empty plain of jet with a few birds flying over it.

The windows of the houses watched us with a hundred blank eyes as we walked the naked roads. I felt that other eyes were watching us, too, but that was a feeling I'd had even in the fog. It might only have been imagination.

But I thought not.

I whispered to Pete, as though afraid of being overheard by the empty air: "They'll expect us to make straight for their HQ—it's in a house called *Moravia*, round the next turning. They're probably watching us now through TV cameras. However, I've a trick up my sleeve too. Follow me."

I struck off sharply across the corner of the Heath which lay behind my road. It was well wooded and thick with undergrowth. I picked my way through it. If any TV cameras had been trained on us, the watchers could not see us now. It was years since I'd visited the spot I sought and I began to fear I'd never find it. And then I did.

It was a flat slab of stone, grey and mossy, hardly visible in the long grass. I knelt, fumbled round it, then pressed the slightest of projections. Creaking, the slab raised itself on hinges, an automatic trapdoor, disclosing a narrow well.

Pete was astonished.

I explained quickly: "My father was a professional criminal. He feared the police would catch up with him one day. He never built a house without providing it with a secret bolt-hole. I'm a kind of criminal too. I followed Dad's example, though I never really believed I'd have to use the thing. This is the back entrance to my house. At least, it *was* my house. Sarah Masters is almost certainly living in it now. Our best plan is to grab her first, force her to tell us exactly what the Makkees are doing and what they intend."

"You think she'll talk?"

"It's possible. It's even possible I can persuade her to join us, now we've a good chance of being the winning side. She likes to be on the winning side. If so, she may be able to slip behind the Makkees' backs and open up that tunnel again. The mechanism is operated from their HQ, you can bet."

Pete rubbed his chin. "But supposing she's still agin us?"

I scowled. "Then, so help me, I'll kill her!"

Pete looked surprised by my vehemence. I surprised myself. My feelings about Sarah kept reaching boiling point. When I thought of her I literally trembled with passion, torn between hate, desire and love.

"Come on," I snapped, roughly, and lowered myself into the well. I descended the short ladder, flicking the light switch as I passed, and waited for him in the low, soft-lit concrete passage below. He joined me. I tripped another switch which closed the trapdoor.

The passage ended at a camouflaged door in my wine-cellar. Treading carefully, I led the way upstairs. The place was even quieter than I was.

I tiptoed into the lounge. It was empty. I glanced across at the wide window which once had offered that wonderful view of London. I gasped, and hurried across to it.

"Pete," I called, softly. "Look here."

He came and looked. The black tide of darkness had risen sometime during the last few minutes and had lapped over the wall at the bottom of my sloping garden. Most of the streets we'd climbed from the station were now under the pitchy fog. We were practically marooned in *Hillcrest*.

"They're cutting off our retreat," said Pete, quietly.

I gripped my needle-gun tighter. "Let's take a look upstairs."

We climbed the stairs, knowing that the darkness might invade the house at any moment and climb the stairs behind us. It was a depressing thought.

I walked into my bedroom and started violently when I saw Sarah lying on the floor by the window. Her back was towards me, but I presumed it was Sarah—she wore that same pale yellow dress. But the shape that filled it now looked somehow odd. The smooth curves were gone, and—

I hurried over, stepped across her, looked down into her face. My cry of horror brought Peter running—

I pointed down dumbly, then suddenly burst into tears like a

schoolgirl. I had been in anguish to see her again, and now when at last I saw her it had to be like this.

Sarah was dead, and horribly dead. Her body was so contorted that it no longer looked human. Every joint was twisted, every muscle a lumpy knot. She had bitten through her lower lip and her lightless eyes were turned inward.

"My God!" muttered Peter, and turned away and looked miserably out of the window.

I don't know how long afterwards it was that we became aware of the little figure standing in the bedroom doorway. I was in a state of shock, in a pit of despair blacker than the one beyond the window.

"Interesting," said the thin, whistling voice. "Sarah had her attractions, both mental and physical, but like the rest of your kind she was prone to displays of excessive emotion. Witness your own performance just now, Magellan. There's still too much of the brute animal in you all. It's sometimes repulsive, more often tedious."

Peter growled and started for him. But he checked when Drahk levelled a ray-emitter. For myself, I felt that every emotion had been wrung out of me and could only gaze at the Makkee as though he were an actor in a play I was no longer following.

"This," said Drahk, glancing at Sarah's body, "is not a happy setting for social intercourse. Come along to my place, Magellan. I want to talk to you." He addressed Peter. "You had better come also, if you wish to live."

Peter looked at me questioningly. Like a zombie, I found myself moving without thought, stepping over Sarah, walking out of the room. Pete followed, and Drahk followed both of us after he'd taken my gun and circuit-breaker and tossed them away.

Pete saw I'd lost all initiative and made no attempt himself to escape. With the ray-emitter a yard from his back, there was no chance anyhow.

We went into the road. I realised dully that the fog had ceased rising just about on a level with the road surface. Then we were proceeding up the gravel drive to *Moravia* and again the front door opened of itself and admitted us to the clammy heat within.

The reception committee I'd expected was duly waiting in the control room at the back. It was very small: just the unpleasant Willoughby and two other jet-eyed Makkees.

The wall of screens they were watching was alive with images, some flickering with the meaningless patterns I'd seen before, others

depicting scenes of streets with people slowly, and apparently aimlessly, moving about them.

"Good lord!" exclaimed Peter, and pointed. "There's Gerry!"

I came partially out of my daze, though the ache in my heart would not ease. I stared at the screens. I recognised the streets: they were all in the vicinity of the Hampstead tube station. I recognised, too, many of the men in them. Gerry Cross had a screen all to himself. I noted with feeble surprise that, like the others, his clothes were wringing wet from the waist down.

"We're keeping a close watch on that man," fluted Drahk, "because he is the leader—now. But, as you see, he is really only the blind leading the blind."

"You've blinded them?" I said in a lifeless whisper.

"Only in the way they were blinded before—by fog. They look to be in daylight, but they are not. You are seeing them by courtesy of our light amplifiers, just as we watched you feeling your way along that railway line. We heard you, also. You overlooked the fact that your telephone sent signals along the line ahead of it, as well as behind it. We had tapped in, as you put it, at this end."

I made no answer. I watched Cross groping his way, with the dubious help of a hand-lamp, along the shop-fronts. He didn't know Hampstead at all, and was obviously lost. He was wandering away from us. He kept stopping to call out, as others did, but it was plain that they were losing contact in the impenetrable dark. Little groups had joined hands, but unconsciously they were only walking in circles.

So much for my commando raid.

However, I was relieved to see them alive and to know that somehow they'd escaped from that tunnel.

Willoughby suddenly piped up, all malice. "We understand you won quite a name for yourself, Magellan, as the 'New Napoleon' —an allusion to some historic warrior, apparently. Certainly you inflicted some defeats on us——"

"With the assistance of our ancient enemy, whom you call 'Prospero,'" cut in Drahk. "He has given us a lot of trouble in the past but his life-span must be nearing its end now."

Willoughby picked up his own thread again. "But in the long run you could never have hoped to defeat Uvova. That is our pet name for the electronic computer which is the brain of our network of automation. It gives all the answers. We fed into it the full facts of your battle tactics. It analysed them and then

began to predict your next moves before you had consciously planned them yourself. Therefore, long before you reached Harrow we knew you would attack from that direction. When we added the fog factor to the general data, Uvova made exactly the decisions you would make. It told us you would follow the monorail here. And so we were all ready to receive you."

"Nevertheless," said Drahk, "there was one thing Uvova failed to predict. We had prepared that section of railway tunnel as a death-trap. We let you two emerge and then we sealed both ends, trapping your two hundred men. A large water main passes over the tunnel. We had made a connection between them, fitted with valves that could be opened from this control room. Our plan was to capture you, just as we have done, and then drown the next in command complete with the cream of your army. That would have decided the war—Uvova guaranteed it."

"You wicked swine!" Peter was pale with anger.

It left me unmoved. The plan had obviously misfired, so what was the point of caring now? I still felt dead inside.

Drahk continued: "Unfortunately a human element upset calculations. An element that Uvova could not have taken into consideration because it had been given no information on the subject. Sarah Masters was in love with you, Magellan. She mistakenly thought you had been trapped in the tunnel with the other men and were about to be drowned. When the water began pouring in, she suddenly turned the switch that opened the tunnel doors again. And she fought us off and then ran from the house. By the time we had closed the doors again, it was too late: your men had escaped from this end of the tunnel with no more than a soaking. Not that it did them much good. We only drowned them again—in fog."

My apathy had gone. It was fantastic. Sarah had loved me! She had risked—and lost—her life to save me. My mind was whirling. I kept gulping. Poor murdered Sarah!

Drahk was piping monotonously on. "Sarah was no longer to be trusted. She had reverted to type. I pursued her. She tried to take refuge in what was previously your house. I cornered her in the bedroom—and rayed her to death. I regret it deeply now. It was a prolonged and agonising death. I should not have killed her that way. I should not have killed her at all. You see, even we Makkees are liable to displays of animal passion when we are deeply frustrated."

I stared at him. My eyes must have been as wild as a lunatic's.

His own blank black eyes held my gaze for a moment, and then he looked away. I knew then that he wasn't referring only to the frustration of his war plans. In his strange way he had been in love with Sarah too. Or at least with that special personality she assumed in the presence of the Makkees. Probably he wasn't even aware of the other Sarahs which had dwelt in that lovely form.

Sarah's death wasn't so much an execution for treachery as a murder through Drahk's blind, unreasoning jealousy: she had revealed her love for another.

Still looking away from me, Drahk went on: "A few moments after she died, I heard you two moving about on the lower floor. I hid behind the door of another room and waited——"

I moved to go for him. He must have been watching me from the corners of those inscrutable eyes, for he turned his head sharply before I had completed one pace. He held the ray-emitter at arm's length, like a man taking deliberate aim with a pistol, and its big, round, translucent eye stared straight into mine.

I couldn't face it. Madly angry though I was, the memory of that awful pain which could start from that lens inhibited me. I stopped dead.

But in the same moment Peter Butler launched himself at that stiff, outstretched arm. I suppose he thought Drahk was about to ray me. Drahk merely dropped his arm. Pete grabbed at nothing, stumbled and fell. Drahk rayed him briefly as he lay there, then immediately covered me again.

Willoughby and the other two Makkees looked on with faces devoid of expression but their attitudes betrayed their tenseness.

Peter moaned, twisted with cramp. To try to save me, he'd dared the fate I had quailed from. This was the man I had called spineless, and I was supposed to be his leader and a living example.

Since that moment I have never judged a fellow man harshly.

Drahk indicated the solitary chair at the desk. "I should feel happier if you were seated, Magellan. To have men continually leaping at one's throat tends to disturb the flow of conversation."

I sat down sullenly. Drahk said something to one of the Makkees, who left the room and returned a minute later with some lengths of nylon cord. He tied my wrists together and bound my ankles to the chair legs. At the same time his mate also bound the prone Peter hand and foot.

Meanwhile, Drahk and Willoughby were whispering sibilantly together over by the control panel. Between them they contrived to watch both us and the TV screens. The changing patterns on

some of the screens were obviously conveying sense to them as clearly as ordinary print would to me. Perhaps they were reports from Makkees beyond the nearer stars, or maybe they were anxious inquiries from the fleet of hopeful colonists that must be somewhere out in space.

Whatever they were, Drahk made no attempt to answer them that I could see.

Presently he crossed to the window and peered out at the huge bulk of the flying saucer which still reposed upon the wide lawns. His expression was as wooden as ever, but I sensed that he wasn't entirely at ease.

I craned my neck to see as many of the TV screens as I could. Hope revived a little, but not much. Gerry Cross had realised he was wandering downhill and therefore away from the crest where I'd told him the Makkees' house was. Now he had about-turned and was coming up the road that would lead him past this house—if he could manage to stay on the road.

Also, unknown to him, a group of five of his men, hands linked, were feeling their way slowly with their feet up the slope that would bring them to the bottom of the garden behind the house. Probably they were quite unaware that they were heading straight for us. Just as probably the garden fence would divert them when they reached it.

Even if they and Gerry did converge blindly on *Moravia*, what chance had they of escaping the ambush which the Makkees could so easily prepare?

All the same, Drahk was uneasy.

I watched him keenly. Then I said, suddenly: "My men are a lot nearer than your reinforcements, aren't they?"

He made no answer.

Willoughby shrilled: "Your men can do nothing to us, Magellan, even though there *are* only four of us left—"

"Be quiet, you fool!" snapped Drahk, rounding on him, and making the mistake himself of speaking in English.

I smiled grimly. "Good for Prospero! He certainly decimated your little vanguard. Only four of you left, eh?"

"Only four of us left—*here*," Drahk amended. "And Prospero—if he is still alive, which I doubt—cannot do us any more harm. We are well beyond his range. And we hold you as a hostage, General Napoleon Magellan. Judging by the behaviour of your underling here, your life means a lot to your followers."

"Against the saving of all men, the safety of one man—even

myself—weighs precisely nothing in the balance," I said. "My men understand that—completely. So don't fool yourself."

Pete rolled over painfully, so that he could look up. His face was white. "Good man!" he gasped, true-blue Cambridge to the last.

Willoughby drew Drahk's attention to one of the screens. The five men had reached the garden fence, deliberated, and were now climbing it. They had the sense to try to keep to a beeline up the gradient, for as long as they were climbing they knew they were going roughly the right way.

Cross had picked his men well.

Drahk said something quietly and Willoughby turned a large dial on the control panel. Drahk was looking towards the window. I followed his gaze and saw the black fog dropping away down the garden like a swiftly ebbing tide.

There was a sharp, hissing exclamation, and I turned to see Drahk angrily push Willoughby aside and seize the dial himself. He spun it in the opposite direction and the fog rose higher even than before, creeping above the base of the flying saucer. Then it stopped.

The patently rather stupid Willoughby had turned the dial the wrong way.

Drahk had laid another couple of feet of fog over the heads of the men, but I was unable to see that it could make much difference. It was close to the limit, for if he raised the level much more, Drahk would only engulf himself in the fog. The light-amplifying screens would be useless when their operator could no longer see them.

Gerry Cross, all alone, came on steadily up the road. The camera tracked him faithfully. His head broke the surface. He stopped, and I could see the surprised and pleased expression on his fat face. He looked carefully around, taking his bearings.

I had described to him the situation and appearance of *Moravia*, the Makkees' HQ, so that he could take over the operation if anything happened to me. The road surface was now some two feet under the black murk, but the baseless houses still stood solidly and recognisably in their rows.

Cross seemed to see enough to satisfy him, anyway. He pulled back the safety catch of his rifle and began walking purposefully along the road towards us, looking as though he were wading thigh-deep in black water.

The five men down on the garden slopes continued to mount

steadily towards the broad lawns, but they still had a fair way to come. Gerry was nearer.

Drahk acted. He opened a desk drawer beside me and took out three needle-guns. He distributed them to the three Makkees with some rapid directions. He kept the ray emitter himself.

He glanced speculatively at the window, but only for a moment. It commanded the garden but it was apparently impossible to use as a fire-point. The needles wouldn't penetrate the clearplast. Neither, presumably, would the paralysing rays in any effective strength. And, like the windows of all modern air-conditioned houses, this window wasn't made to be opened.

He turned his back on it and hurried from the room. The two nameless Makkees accompanied him. Willoughby remained to guard us and watch the screens.

I watched the screen which showed the view from the front of the house and saw the trio split up on the fog-covered drive. Drahk remained there. The other two went around the side of the house, to the back. I looked round at the window and saw them take up positions behind the massive saucer. They had their needle-guns levelled, ready to shoot at the five men out there the moment their heads broke the dark surface.

Mighty anxious now, I swivelled my gaze round just in time to glimpse Drahk throw himself down in the middle of the drive, where he could command the gateway and also see part way along the road. The fog hid his body completely and he barely kept his nose above it. He was holding the ray-emitter concealed under the fog. Now I understood why he had raised the fog level by that small amount.

The bulky Gerry came plodding heavily along the road towards the house. He couldn't possibly be aware of the Makkee lying in wait for him.

Peter groaned. Willoughby gave a silly little titter. He, too, was watching the screens intently, though he kept shooting glances at us to assure himself that we were still bound and helpless.

Actually, I wasn't quite so bound as he imagined. Being tied hand and foot in a chair was a routine feature of my fake medium act. It was just like old times. I knew plenty about unravelling knots and getting out of hand-ties.

For some minutes now, despite all the distracting events, I'd been surreptitiously untying myself, almost from pure force of habit. I still kept the loops about my wrists and ankles, but I could slip out of them any time I chose.

The trouble was Willoughby had a gun. Also there was a desk between him and me—and a matter of some eight paces. Even if he weren't looking, he would hear me moving on that hard marloneum floor before I'd got round the desk.

I'd already peeped in the open desk drawer. There weren't any more guns.

So although I wasn't exactly bound and helpless, I still felt pretty helpless. However, at the moment I was more concerned about Gerry Cross's situation than my own. He was walking almost blithely into Drahk's ambush and there was no way of warning him.

Mingled with my anxiety was vexation at his carelessness. Surely he knew enough about the Makkees not to risk walking so openly up to their headquarters; alone and unsupported.

He was coming abreast of *Hillcrest*, my own house, and almost within range of the green rays. Drahk had ducked lower still. Only the top of his head was visible and it was as motionless as a stone. His finger must be on the trigger.

Then Cross paused by the gateway to *Hillcrest*. To my surprise and relief he turned aside and went up my drive. Well, if he entered the house he would probably find Sarah's body and that would put him on the *qui vive* at once.

I snatched a moment to glance out of the window. The first man's head was just emerging from the fog lake, well down the garden, beyond the level lawns. The waiting Makkees hadn't the sense to hold their fire. Both took a pot-shot. Both missed. The deadly needles darted into the fog feet away from their target—which promptly ducked beneath the concealing blackness again.

On the screen, I saw the five men backing down the slope, still maintaining contact. Soon they stopped to confer.

Then, faintly, I heard a sound which made me almost jump with the little shock of recognition. It was the blare of the klaxon horn on my ancient Rolls car. The body of the big house muffled its voice to me, but out in the open, in the utter silence of the fog, its harshly powerful note must have carried for a mile or more.

Automatically, the tracking camera had kept Cross in focus. There he was, sitting in the driving seat of my car, which I'd left parked outside the garage so long ago now—and which seemed never to have been touched since.

The note became intermittent and then I realised Gerry was sending Morse. Not only had he memorised it from my teaching: he'd also taught it to many of his own men and it had sometimes been useful in the course of battle.

His men, still wandering directionless in the streets below, must hear it. He was telling them, in Morse, to follow the sound of the horn. Indeed, we could see some of them on the other screens already hurrying as fast as they dared towards the source of the staccato hooting.

Willoughby didn't know about the code, but he could see what was happening, and he didn't like it a bit.

Drahk didn't like it either, though he could see much less of what was happening. His head was no longer still: it kept turning from side to side, disquietedly.

I seized this respite to rack my brain for an excuse to lure Willoughby to my side so that I could suddenly grab his gun hand. But I was too excited to think clearly. I came up with a stale one.

"These cords are stopping my circulation. Loosen them just a bit, Willoughby, for pity's sake."

I don't blame him for not buying that one. "Pity, Magellan? Pity is not a Makkee word. It is meaningless."

He wouldn't budge, and he watched me more closely than before. I had succeeded only in stirring his suspicion.

"Damn!" I said.

Pete, still hogtied on the floor, looked up and mumbled something. I only just caught it. "Freeze him. Under the desk."

"Be silent!" rapped Willoughby, pointing the gun down at Pete.

Pete was cautious this time, and shut up. That was annoying, because I hadn't grasped what he meant. Freeze Willoughby under the desk? It sounded like pure nonsense.

The moment Willoughby returned his attention to the screens, I peeped under the desk. Nothing there, except—except the air-conditioning control knob. It was the usual thing to have such a control within arm's reach of one's chair, and this was the only chair.

The heat was full on, and the room was at the tropical temperature the Makkees required for comfort. The range of the conditioner was wide, and the room could be cooled almost to refrigeration point, which was refreshing in high summer.

I got Pete's point and began to act on it. Stealthily I reached under the desk and spun the conditioner knob back as far as it would go. Then I sat up straight and looked innocent.

The room temperature began to drop rapidly. Willoughby felt it at once and shivered: the Makkees just couldn't stand cold. He

knew what I'd done and started towards me. Fine. I'd grab him as he bent to reset the knob.

He was pretty stupid but not all that stupid. He had second thoughts and stopped after only two paces.

"M-Magellan," he said, and his teeth were chattering, "turn the heat on again."

"No, let's keep cool heads, Willoughby," I said.

He aimed the gun at my heart. "I shall give you f-five seconds," he said. Then he began to count down. That was his mistake. He waited five seconds too long. It was time enough for the room temperature to drop another twenty degrees and it all but paralysed him. He was shaking all over.

I took my chance, cast off my bonds and scrambled sideways. His aim tried to follow me, but his gun hand was shaking uncontrollably. The thin barrel waved about wildly.

*Zip!* He fired. The needle missed me by a yard. He hadn't time to fire another. My clumsy tackle brought him down hard. His head hit the marloneum floor with a loud crack, and he lay still. Blood began to seep from his ear.

I went to free Peter.

"Never mind me," he gasped. "Look—Drahk's gunning for Gerry."

I glanced hastily at the screens. Drahk had abandoned concealment, risen, and was hurrying from the drive into the road, heading for *Hillcrest* with his ray-emitter ready for action.

Gerry was still seated in the car, hooting away happily. A whole bunch of his men were pretty close now and should emerge from the darkness at the end of the road at almost any moment.

But obviously Drahk would get there first.

"Damn!" I exploded, again, and made for the door.

Again Peter had to think for me. "Wait!" he called, urgently. "Lift the fog. Turn that dial—"

"Of course!" I remembered the dial on the control panel and which way to turn it. I turned it hard, and the black fog dropped away from the slopes of Hampstead as though it were being sucked into the ground.

Gerry's men could see their way now, and they came pouring from all directions. Drahk halted, undecided. Rifle bullets began to whizz past him. He immediately became decided. He turned and came haring back towards *Moravia*.

Gerry stopped hooting. He started the Rolls, shot down the drive, swung into the road and drove hard after Drahk.

Drahk cast away the heavy ray-emitter to run more freely. It probably wouldn't have stopped Gerry, crouched in the fast-moving car, anyway.

Drahk was going like a greyhound. It looked as though he would succeed in gaining sanctuary, after all. I rushed to the front door, eager to act as a one-man reception-committee for him. Then I realised I hadn't brought Willoughby's needle-gun. No matter: Drahk was weaponless too now, and I had no doubts about my ability to cope with him with my bare hands. Or even only one bare hand.

If I could just get it to his skinny neck.

Cunningly, I waited behind the half-open front door, ready to pounce as he came in. But he didn't come. I peered out. The Rolls had stopped a dozen yards back along the road and the over-weight Gerry was making a bad job of climbing over the front garden fence, which the agile Drahk had scrambled over before him.

Gerry was stuck, fat legs astride the top of the fence, unable to move either way. He saw me and yelled: "Get him, Charlie! He's gone round the back."

I cursed, and dashed round the side of the house. I turned the corner and saw one Makkee lying dead on the lawn, shot by one of our marksmen, and two Makkees disappearing through a closing aperture in the gleaming flying saucer. One of them was Drahk.

I shouted, stupidly, uselessly. The aperture shut altogether, and the saucer began to rise, seeming to spin. It hovered hugely over the house, and then Drahk's voice came, strong and shrill, through a loud-hailer. "This is only a passing defeat, Magellan. There are other countries and other planets. Keep out of my way."

The saucer flew up and veered away over London, now a fully undraped city again. The speeding disc became as small as the distant dome of St. Paul's, shrank still smaller, became a shining pearl, and vanished far to the south.

Where it was bound for I still do not know.

There was a scattering of black dust over the lawns. It lay thick in London. It was all that was left of the black fog, which had collapsed when the power that had sustained it was withdrawn.

London had recovered its sight. So had my army. But their real enemy had got away.

I trailed back round the house, encountering Cross on the way. His trousers were torn.

"We've done it," I said.

"A famous victory," he said. "But we haven't taken a single prisoner."

"Yes, we have. He's in the house."

He was still there when we got back. He would have to be carried out, for he was dead. Willoughby had fractured his thin little skull in that fall.

We released the numb Peter.

I said: "When the time comes for handing out the medals, I'm going to make special mention of Peter Butler. If it hadn't been for his quick wit and initiative—"

Peter made a coarse interjection which he may or may not have learned at Harrow or Cambridge.

We had captured another prisoner, whose brain was very much alive. We found it in the basement: Uvova, the master computer. I think it's going to be an invaluable assistant—when we discover how to operate it.

There was an unpleasant job waiting to be done at *Hillcrest*. The others helped. I nearly broke down. It was impossible to think of living there again after that. I moved out.

When I was packing my books I glanced idly through some old volumes of my diary, which I'd been so scared Sarah might read.

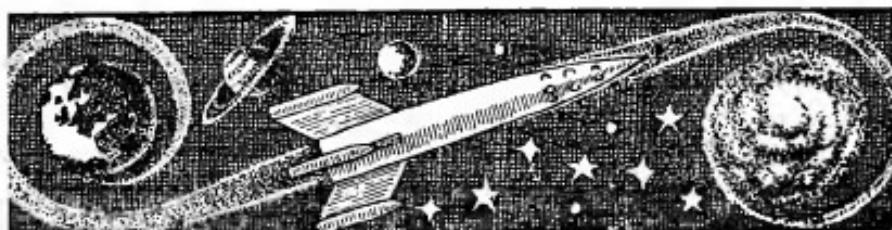
She had read them.

They were a complete giveaway of myself. And yet she loved me in spite of them—or perhaps because of them. She had added affectionate comments in the margins, some bitingly witty, some sympathetic and understanding.

Queer, lonely, self-isolated soul, she'd got to know me through those idiotic journals. And in more than one place she'd written: "Charlie, you dear old fool, I love you."

It's all I have left of her.

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE



# And the Kings Depart

*Was there an intelligent dominant species on Earth before the rise of Man? In this article a regular contributor on scientific subjects gives us an authoritative reply to this fascinating question*

A creature that was not Man, but was more than Man, was overlord of the Earth for a hundred thousand years.

His overlordship was founded not upon brute strength, as had been that of the brainless reptiles, for he was not the mightiest creature that stalked in the primitive dawn. He had the cunning of his hands, and the thoughts of a conscious mind, to maintain his pre-eminence.

We do not know what his name was—but we call him *Homo Neanderthalensis*—Neanderthal Man; and he ruled Asia and Europe whilst *Homo Sapiens* was still sunk in his animal-like childhood. Even as our ancestors were migrating with the herds of wild animals fleeing the cold of the north, Neanderthal was warmly housed in his caves, pro-

tected by fire from the winters, and by stone tools from the carnivores.

For Neanderthal was a success in the Old World.

With intelligence to guide them, the members of this long-gone race must have thought of men as little more than apes, fleet but weaponless, relying on nails and fangs instead of cunning and tools.

Mankind left his dead to rot where they fell in those far off days; but Neanderthal thought of life beyond the grave and, with full rituals, buried his dead in the hope of resurrection. It is to this shadowy creature from the past that we must look for the origins of our culture. However much our manners may appear to differ on the surface today, running beneath them all is a broad base

directly attributable to Neanderthal. All the early important features of our civilisation, from speech to fire, were taken from Neanderthal and used, in the end, to overthrow him.

The trail of Neanderthal over the thousands of years of his dominance on this planet is difficult to trace, fragments must tell volumes of his origins and development and way of life and ultimate disappearance. Fresh evidence continues to come to light, and current theories run counter to those held only a few years ago. And, inevitably, there are friendly, scientific differences of opinion.

Over seventy skeletons of Neanderthal have been discovered, together with tons of his tools and the bones of animals he had slain. In general, Neanderthal skeletons fall into two groups.

Classical Neanderthal would have looked monstrous to our eyes; a massive, compact, five-feet tall creature that shambled across the Ice Age scene on bow-legs. With jutting protuberances of bone making a ridge over his eyes, together with a flat-topped skull, puffed out at the sides and thrust well forward on his shoulders, his physical characteristics were ogre-like. Yet his capacity for living and loving was probably greater than any Homo Sapien of the early ages.

The other type of Neanderthal

had more human features, smaller brow ridges over the eyes, human-like teeth, a higher domed skull and he walked more erectly. Yet this type—the progressive Neanderthal—lived before classical Neanderthal, and, in one known case, lived in adjacent caves at the same time.

Whether progressive Neanderthal was a less specialised type of Neanderthal, from which the classical type was a blind-alley offshoot, or whether the finer features of the progressive type were due to inter-breeding with *Homo Sapiens*, is still one of the puzzles of anthropology. But such a fantastic degree of parallel evolution is needed to explain the characteristics of *Homo Sapiens* and Neanderthal as separate developments, that it is more than probable that Neanderthal frequently took the women of the subservient sapiens to his caves.

If but two fragments of skull—those found at Swanscombe and Fontchevade—had never been discovered, it would be perfectly logical to assume that sapiens descended directly from Neanderthal. Unfortunately for neat lines of descent, these fragments appear to be sapiens—and to antedate much of Neanderthal.

Only for the last 110 years have the remains of Neanderthal been dug out of caves and preserved—during the next 100 years we may find enough addi-

tional material, most probably in China, to round out the story of the evolution of Man and Neanderthal, and to plot their paths that diverged, intermingled, parted and finally came together with the catastrophic extinction of one of them.

To begin what we know of the story, we have to go back in time for over half a million years. About five hundred thousand years ago the long summer of an interglacial warm period lay over the Earth. One of our ancestors was ambling across Germany and was killed—life was too hard for creatures to die of old age in those bleak days. Stripped of flesh, his bones were eaten, or carried away by the elements. His jaw-bone was the sole surviving piece. It was covered by sand and, through the long æons, grain upon grain was built up over it, the top layers of soil being eroded away by wind and water and ice, but always being rebuilt. Mountains grew, volcanoes erupted, ice-ages came and went; but still the jaw-bone remained safely locked in its sandy tomb.

Then men came for sand to build their cities, and found a scrap of bone deep in a sand pit.

And so the last remnant of Heidelberg Man was brought to light.

The size and thickness of his jaw made early anthropologists consider him to be an ancestor of Neanderthal; but the modern

view is that Heidelberg Man is one of our own forefathers. Led to this conclusion by his human-like teeth, particularly the small canines, anthropologists assume that teeth are a better criterion of humanity than the shape of the chin, which, in this case, is definitely brute-like.

About the same time, geologically speaking, as men of the Heidelberg race were roaming Europe, using bone implements, another species was evolving in Asia. The earliest bones from the island of Java—a treasure trove for anthropologists—show that a creature with ape-like tusks lived there, and made stone tools, and fought and died. But this was probably no part of Man's ancestral line. His large canine teeth are nearer those of Neanderthal, although his nose must have been near-human in shape.

During the next 100,000 years, the Neanderthal line continued to evolve in that part of the world, for later bones and tools are more advanced, and skulls from Java show the typical heavy bone ridges over the eyes usually associated with Neanderthal. These creatures from 400,000 years ago walked moderately erectly, but they had a brain capacity of only 850 ccs. Adult Europeans today have a brain capacity of 1,480 ccs; any man found today with a capacity of less than 900 ccs is regarded as an idiot.

A jump of 100,000 years into

the future and half way round the world brings us to the second earliest bone fragments from the Homo Sapiens line. The Swanscombe skull fragments are human in all their characteristics. They are from the head of a woman. Three hundred thousand years ago, Homo Sapiens made his home in England, in the Garden of England, Kent, and left his tools in the river terraces that today line the Thames. But three pieces of one skull are little enough to prove the existence of humans at that period, certainly they are not enough for us to give a detailed picture of Man's way of life in that long-gone time.

Back in Asia at the same time, Pekin Man, Neanderthal in physical structure, had mastered fire and was making quartzite tools. Making his home in caves, he had a hunting culture, and was probably using crude speech to convey ideas more complex than could be explained by gestures. We know a fair amount about Pekin Man, for parts of forty skeletons were found in the Choukoutien caves. His average brain capacity had risen to 1,225 ccs. and whilst he still retained the receding forehead of the early Java men, there was a distinct bulge towards the front of his skull. Pekin Man carried his five feet of height moderately erectly, but his jaw and lack of chin were distinctly nearer Neanderthal than Homo Sapiens.

It is at this point in the story's unfolding that so many authorities differ. Had, 300,000 years ago, Homo Sapiens already evolved as a distinct species?

Or was Pekin Man a predecessor of both Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens? Or did Homo Sapiens branch out later as a separate species by mutation or cross-breeding between various Neanderthal types?

In general, there is no escaping the evidence of the Swanscombe skull. Man was a distinct species well back in time. It is likely that the following picture is correct.

Pekin Man evolved to create classical Neanderthal in Asia. When the ice pressed down from the North, it was difficult for him to escape its icy breath by moving west or south. He had to stay and evolve—or die. The weapon he evolved to enable him to live was intelligence.

In contrast, Homo Sapiens evolved in Europe where, when the ice sheets ground down from the pole and carried the cold down to the Mediterranean, North and Central Africa provided a warm refuge. Rain-carrying winds diverted southwards made the Sahara a well watered veldt, which made a wonderland of unlimited pastures for the billions of herbivorous animals which grazed in herds that blackened the plain, and provided one

of the main sources of food for Man. He also ate wild fruit and berries. He lived a nomad life, sleeping in the open and gradually drifting North or South as the climate changed. It was the great waiting childhood of the race, where in a thousand years nothing had changed.

By 250,000 years ago, Neanderthal, by contrast, had already crossed Asia to reach at least as far as Germany; but the woman's skull found at Steinheim shows a puzzling mixture of Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens characteristics. Whilst it has the typical neanderthaloid bone ridge over the eyes, the skull is more dome shaped and the forehead not so flat as in Pekin Man or the classical Neanderthal type that was later to over-run Europe. She used fire and tools and had a brain capacity of 1,070 ccs. Dare we venture a guess here, a guess that must not be allowed to confuse the facts as they are known? Could not this girl of so long ago have been a half-breed—the daughter of a conquering Neanderthal warrior and a captive Homo Sapiens woman? With just one fragment to illumine for us the happenings of a thousand years, who knows upon what strange chance the light may fall?

It is as if, during this trek across Asia and Europe, during that warm interglacial period, Neanderthal had mingled and mated with Homo Sapiens to pro-

duce a cross-breed now known as progressive Neanderthal.

Proof that Homo Sapiens was in Europe a little over 150,000 years ago comes from the skull found at Fontchevade; but most of the early stone tools found in Europe have been classed as being part of Neanderthal culture.

About 150,000 years ago, another wave of classical Neanderthals may have swarmed out of Asia and taken over Europe. Once again there is evidence of interbreeding between Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens. Two adjacent caves in Mount Carmel in Palestine were found to contain twelve skeletons. Ten of these were in the Skuhl cave and one of them was a progressive Neanderthal male with a high-domed skull with a capacity of 1,550 ccs. and teeth similar to our own; but he possessed the large ridge of bone over the eyes typical of Neanderthal.

In the adjacent Tabun cave was the skeleton of a classical Neanderthal woman, classical in that she had no chin and large bone ridges, but with leg bones showing that she walked erect, in a manner nearer the fashion of Homo Sapiens.

One piece of evidence here flashes the brilliant light of immediacy upon that long-ago scene. Another of the Skuhl cave skeletons shows that by this time Neanderthal was using wooden spears. The skeleton's hip-bone

contains a hole where the broken-off wooden spear-point has fossilised. What dramatic act has been so mercilessly immortalised here?

Remains similar to these have been found in Yugoslavia, showing that cohabitation of classical and progressive Neanderthal was no isolated phenomenon.

Then, 120,000 years ago, progressive Neanderthal disappeared as though he had never been; as though he had been overwhelmed by another wave of classical Neanderthals storming from Asia. And yet these people, too, conquering Europe and the Near East, had a hunting culture well-fitted for survival in the Fourth Ice Age that was then overtaking Europe. They used scrapers to work animals' skins into clothes; they employed flint to strike fire from pieces of iron pyrites, so that they always commanded fire when they needed it, and they flung flint-tipped spears and, possibly, bolas balls to catch game.

Mammoth skulls formed their cooking pots and the bones of horses and bison made hammers for the working of flint. Practically every European and Mediterranean country contains his homes and tools. Even his footprints have been discovered in caves in Italy; large, lumpy prints with apparently no spring in the step.

Yet this classical Neanderthal—the typically brutish "ape-

man" of ill-informed cartoons,—follows after the progressive type. Perhaps the progressives died out merely because they intermarried with *Homo Sapiens*—and then fled before the greater power of the古典的

Whatever the truth of the disappearance of the progressives, they have been swept from the stage of prehistory. And, at this time, other Neanderthal-type creatures also lived in Africa and Java.

Some of the remains found along the banks of the Solo River in Java show that there lived there a neanderthaloid race with heavy brow ridges and a skull of 1,100 ccs. They, too, worked bone and horn and used the bolas—and fashioned harpoons. Some anthropologists believe that they are the ancestors of the Australian aborigines..

Between Solo Man and classical Neanderthal—closer to those men of the Solo River in form than to Neanderthal—was Rhodesian Man from the same era. Earthly distance separated them; but distance in evolution parted them far more widely. Rhodesian Man is an anomaly in that he had enormous ridges of bone over the eyes; but he had human type teeth and he walked upright as does a man of today. His brain capacity was 1,280 ccs.

But of all these different races, the fragments of whose patterns of life we find today, none was

greater than Neanderthal. Back in Europe, he continued to evolve in his specialised way amidst the glaciers and glacial fauna. By 80,000 years ago, Neanderthal was carefully burying his dead, tenderly placing food and tools in the graves and erecting goats' horns over them. His stone culture—the Mousterian—far surpasses anything preceding. The skeleton from La Chapelle aux Saints in France is the best classical Neanderthal specimen yet found. It is typically bow-legged and squat, lacks a chin, and yet his brain capacity of 1,600 ccs. is greater than ours of today. He probably had a spoken language but his flat forehead denotes the lack of the all-important frontal brain. He had enormous brow ridges, and, strangely, when he chewed it seems that he moved his jaw to and fro instead of from side to side. Familiarly, he was right handed, as is shown by the greater size of the left part of his brain.

This was the creature—demanding in all right the accolade of "Man"—that roamed the world, undisputed master, for so many thousands of years. He hunted his food with all the skill and cunning given him by the spark of intelligence, and ate and drank before the warming fires of his caves when our own ancestors, Homo Sapiens, fled shivering before the glaciers and the wild beasts.

What Neanderthal could have achieved if left to evolve on his own is a matter of conjecture. It may well be that classical Neanderthal, like the reptiles, had grown along the blind alley of over-specialisation and, when the glaciers retreated during a warm spell during the Fourth Ice Age in Europe, was unable to adapt and was over-run and obliterated by Homo Sapiens using developments of his own tools.

It may well be that he interbred with Man, and his genes had the curse of a recessive pattern that eventually wiped his face and form out as completely as though exterminated by spear and fire. Theories have been advanced that under the impact of the suddenly appearing superior culture of Homo Sapiens he withered away, died of a broken heart, bereft of the will to live. This sad end of a race has parallels in our own day—as our consciences tell us.

Neanderthal hung on to existence in the hills of Iraq, where recent discoveries in the Shanidar cave indicate that he was still eking out a precarious living 45,000 years ago. This is not far from where, 30,000 years later, Homo Sapiens was to give up his nomadic life and begin living in villages, raising crops and taming animals into domesticity.

Is it merely ironic, or is there a tenuous but unbreakable connection between these time-separated events? The last known

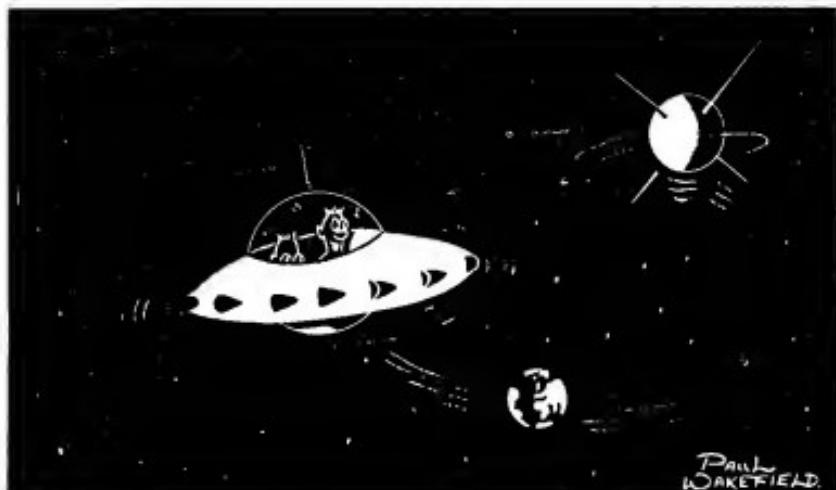
home of Neanderthal—and the place where Mankind began his civilisation, which was the beginning of his real conquest of his environment, where both within that small compass of earth and river.

Such is the speed of the rise and fall of a species. 100,000 years ago, Neanderthal was king. Today, Homo Sapiens rules the world.

If the destruction of the Neanderthal scheme of things was caused by the hand of Man, we

may still carry within our minds a racial guilt-complex, unrecognised and unwanted. But perhaps, if 100,000 years from now, in some distant future we cannot clearly envisage, another species digs within the wreckage of concrete caves to find the truth of the obliteration of our way of life, it seems most unlikely that they will feel any blame or sense of guilt.

If, like Homo Neanderthalensis, Homo Sapiens vanishes from the face of the Earth, he will have only himself to blame.



WATCH OUT, THEY'RE THROWING THINGS !!



# SOMETHING TO READ

New Hard-Cover Science Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

The idea of the generations-long voyage to the stars, in a ship which has a closed system of ecology and economy, has been the prime subject of many a good yarn. Short of overdrives, super-drives, "other space" drives, subspace and Nth-space drives (all of which are very, very imaginative and doubtful) this would appear to be the only way in which mankind can send a ship to the "stars"—meaning, of course, other solar systems. Perhaps Heinlein's "Universe" and "Centaurus II" by A. E. van Vogt are typical examples of this type of story, and (in my opinion) good ones. There have been others—both in magazines and book form—but this is the type of epic for which there is always room for one more, provided it is not just a rehash.

I am pleased to say that Brian W. Aldiss' NON-STOP (Faber and Faber, 252 pp., 15/-) qualifies to join the list. Naturally, if you have read all the other stories of this nature, then I doubt if this book will help you to re-attain your "Sense of Wonder" for this type of yarn. But you should still enjoy it, and if you've not lost your sense of wonder you should be enthralled.

Roy Complain, member of Quarters, one of a perambulating tribe of people who live in the corridors of their world, is dissatisfied. Together with the priest Marapper, Wantage (a hunter with a facial deformity), and two others, he sets out on a journey instigated by the priest to discover "Control", a place which will give them power over the world. Each member of the party has divergent views on the nature of the "world"—obviously apparent to the s-f reader—and they make a very ill-assorted party of fellow-travellers. Working their way across the Decks, heading for the legendary "Forwards" area, they encounter other human tribes, and find traces of what may be either the (also legendary) Giants or the "outsiders"—and Roy meets an even stranger denizen of the jungle growths of the mutated "ponics" which crowd all available space.

Even for the most blasé of s-f readers there are sufficient questions in the story to arouse some speculative interest. Why do the tribesmen have only one dark period in four waking-sleeping periods? is a question you can try to answer before Mr. Aldiss

tells you—there are plenty of clues.

Obviously, the story is that of a star-trip which went wrong, the crew-descendants having lost the purpose for their existence. But where is the vessel headed, and why? These points Mr. Aldiss manages to keep to himself until almost the end of the story (although you can manage a well-considered guess in the third quarter of the book). All in all, it is good entertaining space-opera, not too deeply complicated and with no terrific philosophical implications or messages. It is written for you to enjoy, and it should prove worth the reading.

**THE CENTENARIANS**, by Gilbert Phelps (Heinemann, 218 pp., 15/-) is definitely stated on the dust-wrapper not to be science-fiction. This, naturally because the "literary" world and a too large percentage of the reading public automatically think of Superman and science-fiction in conjunction. In fact, it is a border-line s-f book concerned with a group of aged and "worth-while" people who, when the world is threatened with war, are retired to a place of asylum so that they may be preserved. Quite why such effort should be made to preserve a tag-end of humanity rather than a young and thriving shoot (pardon the mixed metaphor) is not clear. The story is written in a discursive and reminiscing fashion which tends to lose the reader. It is difficult to discover whether the story is primarily concerned with the past of Jerrould (the story-teller) and his half-brother, Chard, or with the present position of these aged but not decrepit fellows in their mountain asylum.

To the place of refuge finally

come two survivors of the catastrophe which has (apparently) depopulated the world, Clive and Angie. But Clive and Angie don't consider themselves as survivors—they have come in search of a treasure supposedly hidden in the Casa. And, naturally, conflict between the oldsters and the two young people soon comes. The end is when Clive and Angie depart (or commit suicide, as some of the aged seem to think), and the old men are left in their asylum, the final and not particularly prepossessing fruit of the human race.

Interesting, but not enthralling, and definitely unsuited to the reader who wants action. Extremely well written in what I feel to be an unfortunate style.

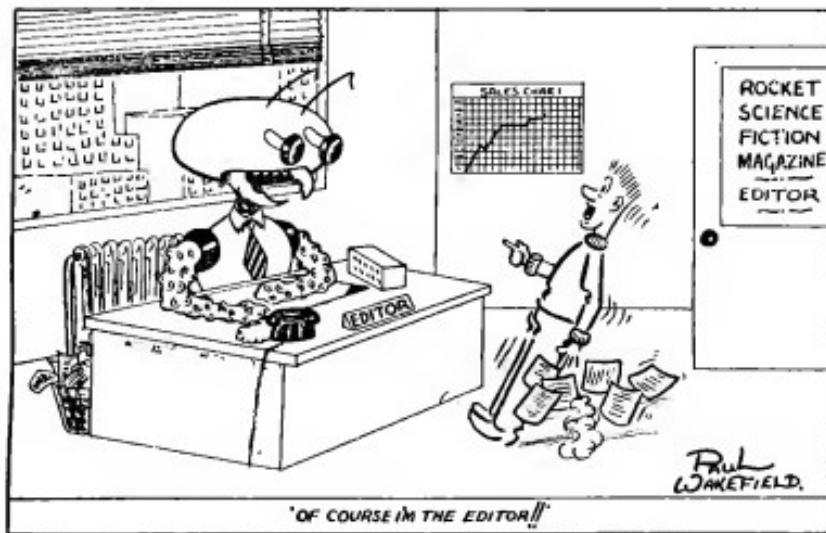
In paperbacks there is Sydney J. Bounds' **THE MOON RAIDERS**, from Digit at 2/-, a reprint of his novel originally published by Foulsham; **HELL'S PAVEMENT** by Damon Knight has been out some time, but I don't think I've mentioned it before. This from Banner, also at 2/-. There are about two pocketbooks a month coming from Badger Books, and some of them (I'm told) are quite good. Personally, I've not been lucky—on page 15 of **OPERATION SATELLITE** by W. H. Fear an engineer starts talking about "cosmic rays from the sun"; on page 51 there is mention of space-suits "designed for them by the foremost scientist on the project"; on page 63 we learn "the human voice in all its clarity can penetrate the Heaviside Layer on either side" (what this means is that radio signals carrying voice transmission come through undistorted).

A little later during this clear

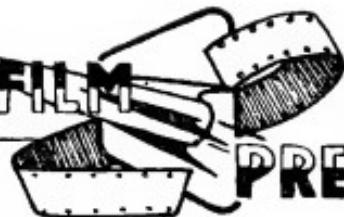
radio conversation we learn that the satellite is in direct radio communication with its base on the Yorkshire moors—despite the fact that the satellite is “somewhere over the American continent”. And to really cap the matter, the character in charge of the satellite wants to know if the base wishes them to maintain constant radio contact, another character points out the batteries won’t last the full fourteen days of the satellite’s orbiting if constant contact is held, and so base and the satellite then decide on how often and when contact should be made. Real organisation, that shows.

Now, the story itself is quite adequately written, the characters are reasonably well portrayed, and the plot is simple but sufficient. Unfortunately, because the scenes and props are so obviously fake, the story just doesn’t get over. It doesn’t arouse in the reader that element

of temporary belief that enables one to overlook minor errors of fact or theory, deliberate or otherwise, essential for the enjoyment of a science-fiction yarn. It falls far short of arousing the complete suspension of orthodox belief which is often required (and obtained) for the enjoyment of one of the major stories. This is the trouble with this type of yarn. There are so many minor errors which show up, even in the bad light reflected from the veneer of scientific knowledge acquired by a reader of the better science fiction, that he is not able to get into the story. The thing doesn’t fit the “facts” as he knows them—and it makes him uncomfortable. Doubtless there are many readers who can really enjoy these tales; but I doubt if many of them will be found among the readers of NEBULA S-F and the other better s-f magazines.



# SCIENTIFILM



# PREVIEWS

*News and Advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's*

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

*Operation Snowman* sounded too much like a polar medical picture so the title has been changed to **WHITE HELL**.

*The Colossal Beast* will be marqued as **WAR OF THE COLOSSAL BEAST**.

*Water Witch* has taken a title switch to **THE THING THAT COULD NOT DIE**.

*Missile Into Space* (how can you face your friends?) will be launched on a cringing public under the title **SPACE MASTER X-7**.

*The Attack of the Star-Beast* has been toned down to **THE CREATURE FROM GALAXY 27**. This one has been scripted by a genuine science-fiction fan, Martin Varno, one of Hollywood's youngest writing talents.

For the first time in my star-crossed career as a scientifilm reviewer I wore out a ballpoint pen just copying down the complete title of a picture for posterity. Posterity should live so long! The title of this 70-minute production, accounting for about 69 of it, is **THE SAGA OF THE VIKING WOMEN AND THEIR VOYAGE TO THE WATERS OF THE GREAT SEA SERPENT**. I did not catch whether a hyphen was in-

cluded in sea-serpent or not, and a wild monster from the Loch Ness couldn't drag me back into the theatre to check for sure. The film—known familiarly as **THE VIKING WOMEN AND THE SEA SERPENT**—takes place in primitive times in the North Atlantic. A band of Viking women who seem to have been abandoned by their men set sail in a longboat to try to find the missing hunters. The impatient maidens get action in the North Atlantic when they run into a whirlpool that makes a girlpool out of half of them. The handful of survivors, led by beauteous blonde Desir, are washed ashore on the island of the Grimaults, a gang of grimsters who have captured and enslaved the Vikings' boy-friends. Enger (played by black beauty Susan Cabot) essays a pre-Quisling rôle with the chief of the Grimaults as she influences Stark to let her have Desir's lover, Vedric, for her own. But when Vedric spurns Enger, her anger knows no bounds and she at first doesn't mind when Desir and Vedric are bound at the stake to be burned alive, but repents when things start getting too hot and prays to the rain god to extin-

guish the flames. Susan Cabot being the kind of gal that even rain gods fall for, she's obliged with a thunder storm that not only cools off the perspiring lovers but knocks off Stark's pride and joy, his son Senja. Enger meets her end at the fangs of wild dogs, while the rest of the Viking guys and dolls are escaping to sea in a stolen boat. The pursuing Grimaults run into the Monster of the Vortex, who resents being run into and eats them up to teach them a lesson, using their boat as a toothpick. Shortly thereafter Vedric takes a sword to the sea serpent, and thereby hangs a dead tail as the happy Vikes sail into the setting Northern lights. . . .

*Flash! WHITE HELL* sounded too reminiscent of the classic *White Hell of Pitz Palu* so the title has just been changed to **CHOOKNA**.

Known while shooting as *Naked Invader*, an all too long 160 minute atrocity called **THE ASTOUNDING SHE-MONSTER** is ready for release on a suspecting audience. This flim-flam is such a waste of time that I feel like it's a crime wasting my own time commenting on it. First of all, the dialogue doesn't fit the situation. The "monster" is played by Shirley Kilpatrick, an (un) cover model who has been seen (but I mean seen) all around the world and all around Shirley. So when characters in the picture are yelling, "Help! help! that horrible monster out there is after us," it was plain to be seen that everyone (at least the male

actors) were running in the wrong direction—away from rather than toward this slinky siren. Her eyebrows witch-arched at 45 degree angles made her alienly attractive rather than repulsive, and even her radio-active lethality might have been overlooked in the face (?) of her torso-activity. Gimmick of the pic is one of these touch-of-death deals where the already small but not small enough cast gets killed one by one by the gal in the shimmering skin-tight metallic sheath who turns out to have been an emissary of peace from one of our neighbouring planets after it's too late and she's been disintegrated by a home-made acid-bomb. Next week, **FRANKENSTEIN'S DAUGHTER**.

That latter title is not a joke; there really is a script on such a picture. Of course by the time it reaches the screen anything can happen: it may be retitled **GRUE CONFESSION** or **MY FATHER WAS A MONSTER**.

*Flash!* from Lawrence, Tibet: "There is no truth to the rumour that the film about the snowmen hereabouts will be dubbed into Esperanto and released in the backward countries as **ANKOOCH, SON OF CHOOKNA**."

To leave a good taste in your mouth, Arthur C. Clarke's tour-de-force, **CHILDHOOD'S END**, is to be hour-long telefilmed, and Ray Bradbury's **AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT** produced as feature-length motion picture.



WALTER WILLIS writes for you

"Let's take science fiction away from the people and give it back to the fans!" The first time I heard this ironic sentiment expressed was in a hotel room during the Manchester Convention a few years ago, and at the time I thought little about it. There were about thirty other people talking at the same time and it was a very small room. . . . I think we would all have suffocated if someone hadn't had the presence of mind to take the telephone off the hook . . . and the atmosphere was not conducive to thought. Besides, some zany humorist chose that moment to open the window and lob a bottle into the canal, proclaiming: "I name this city Manchester!" A lot of water, or whatever that liquid was, has flowed down the Manchester Ship Canal since those days, but the serious question concealed in that first facetious suggestion is now being asked by a lot of people. It is, briefly, when science fiction is really popular will there still be science fiction fans?

Some people would make an even wider issue of it; viz., when space flight becomes a reality will there still be science fiction? But, as Sid Birchby points out in the current *Triode* where both sides of this question are cogently put, in fact quite a small pro-

portion of current science fiction stories are primarily concerned with space flight, and still less with any sort of space flight we're likely to see this century. Besides, if there's one sure thing about science, it is that every discovery uncovers more of our ignorance than it covers. No, I think science fiction will be all right, Jack. But has it pulled up the gangplank and left us behind?

I'm not talking about the keen science fiction reader. It has been suggested that when science fiction becomes widely popular—becomes part of mainstream literature as the intellectuals put it—the specialist reader will die out, but I can't see it myself. Admittedly many of us no longer feel the ravenous hunger for it we used to feel when the only magazine was a slim reprint from *Astounding*, but the point is we would still rather read good science fiction than anything else.

No, what I'm thinking about is the few thousand vocal fans who make up what we know as fandom, those who are sufficiently interested in science fiction to want to communicate with one another and some of whom publish the amateur magazines I review in this column. And here there are two quite separate arguments being advanced in the fanmags. The first is that when

science fiction becomes popular and "respectable" there will be no urge for its readers to band together as a sort of persecuted minority, and the bond which makes science fiction fans all over the world feel closer together than their next door neighbours will weaken. There may be something in this, but I doubt if science fiction will ever become popular in that sense. There will always be the minority who look up at the stars in wonder and the majority who grub along the gutter for pennies.

Take, for instance, as a light-hearted example the researches of two young fans, Ken Potter and Dave Wood, among the inhabitants of Lancaster, as reported in the current *Brennschluss*. Some eight years ago, when the researchers were still small boys, they got to wondering what the public reaction would actually be to an alien visitation. Hundreds of science fiction authors had speculated about it, but apparently no one had actually done any practical work on it, which seemed very unworthy for people dedicated to the Scientific Method. So Dave dressed up in an outlandishly painted shroud decked out with vacuum cleaner attachments, and Ken dashed along the street ahead of him shouting "A Martian's landed!" I regret to have to inform you that some of the natives ignored the Invasion altogether and the rest told it to go away. So there you are; I almost feel sorry for the Martians when they do come. Atomic bombs, death rays and blasters are sort of compliments in a way, but to be cut dead! Mind you, I suspect that the psychological technique in this in-

## ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1958 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below, or on a postcard if preferred and mail it immediately to NEBULA, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

**The Fires Die Down**

**Ninian's Experiences**

**The Beatific Smile**

**Wish Upon A Star**

**War Against Darkness**

Name and Address:

Mr. Robert Owen of Cardiff wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 28. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:—

1. TOUCH OF REALITY By E. C. Tubb	23.5%
2. SOLITARY By Robert Silverberg	18.3%
3. SHIFT CASE By Philip E. High	15.4%
3. VERDICT By Robert Presslie	15.4%
5. NECESSITY By Robert J. Tilley	14.3%
6. FORGIVABLE ERROR By Stuart Allen	13.1%

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in NEBULA No. 34.

stance may have prejudiced the result. Ken's panic-stricken cry was just the sort of thing to bring out the famous English stolidity in the face of danger: they went on with their metaphorical game of bowls. Whereas if Ken had murmured politely: "I say, there's a small boy dressed up in a vacuum cleaner" I daresay they would have flown into a panic and written a letter to *The Times*: "Sir, I saw a Martian in Lancaster this morning, February 27th. Is this a record?"

The other problem is the one you may have guessed yourself from my quotations from current fanmags. It is that nowadays fans don't talk about science fiction all the time, and that's putting it mildly. This is what's been worrying me ever since I started to write this column and what is now worrying all science fiction fans. Our fear is that you, a keen science fiction reader, may write away for a copy of what you understand to be a science fiction fan magazine and be

annoyed to find there isn't a lot about science fiction in it. I could say you were just unlucky and advise you to try again, that there are some very good fan magazines entirely devoted to discussion of science fiction, but I think it's better to be frank about it. We are all science fiction fans and we all like to read and talk about it, but many of us have been doing that for years and we know what we and each other like, and after a while we find people more fun to write about . . . ourselves and each other and the personalities of the science fiction world. I'd ask you to make allowances for that, if you write away for a fan magazine on my recommendation and find something in it you don't immediately understand. The important thing it seems to me is to make it clear to you that this isn't a clique or a closed shop. New people are coming in all the time, though not as many as we'd like, and you're welcome even if all you want to do is sit and watch. But if you do send for a sample I promise you'll find a little world of interesting people of all types and, if you've ever wanted to write or draw and especially if you've a sense of humour, you might even find the gateway to the most fascinating hobby there is.

Here are the addresses of the two fan magazines mentioned: TRIODE, Eric Bentcliffe and Terry Jeeves, 47 Alldis St., Gt. Moor, Stockport, Cheshire; 1/6 per copy. BRENNSCHLUSS, Ken and Irene Potter and Dave Wood, 72 Dallas Rd., Lancaster; 1/- per copy.

Telephone DENTON 2940

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## **STARDUST PATROL**—continued from inside front cover

days before the showers. Such meteor streams are the remains of comets, and when the Earth crosses their orbits, millions of less than pea-size fragments slash lines of light across the night sky.

Our photograph this month shows a meteor trail to the point where its exterior became so hot that it explosively expanded—just as a glass marble will crack if rapidly heated. The meteoric speck of dust blew up. Then the pieces traced their own trails across the sky.

During the day the meteor paths can be seen as tiny vapour trails fifty and more miles up. The similarity between them and high-flying jets leaving their vapour trails is marked—as will be the possible trails of descending missiles.

The vapour from meteor trails condenses as tiny dust particles and drifts very slowly Earthwards. A month later it has reached the moisture-bearing layers of the lower atmosphere and each particle acts as a nucleus on which ice or water can condense. Given this sort of start it is not long before the meteor-seeded clouds are depositing their moisture as rain.

The soft, centuries-old fall-out of dust from space is being analysed by digging out the layers from their Antarctic ice-tomb. Here the inorganic workings of nature form a strange parallel to the organic detritus which drops to the bottoms of the oceans to form pelagic ooze, and which in this International Geophysical Year is being dredged and analysed.

As the impact energy of a medium-sized meteor—about the size of a fine grain of sand—is converted into heat and light, it leaves a spectacular trail of ionised air atoms about six feet in diameter and 15 to 18 miles long across the sky. This makes a fine radar reflector and allows the speed and direction of meteors to be quickly tracked. Too, pairs of cameras, 12 to 25 miles apart, aimed at the same part of the sky can track meteors at night.

If one camera is equipped with a rotating shutter to cut the trail into separate lengths, it is possible to measure the speed, height, deceleration and brightness of meteors, and, from these figures, deduce the pressure, temperature and density of the upper air.

Very useful figures—as the Russians have found—when you want to put up a satellite. Russian teams are measuring meteor activity as part of the IGY, particularly on Meteor Days, when the Earth crosses a meteor stream, and they expect to be radar-tracking meteors for 100 out of the 548 days of the IGY.

American physicists, too, have found a use for meteor trails in a fashion straight from the pages of science fiction.

Normal short wave radio communication is particularly difficult during solar storms, and unreliable in the strategically important polar areas where the auroras blanket the sky. The U.S. scientists utilised the radio reflecting properties of the ionised air of a meteor trail to construct a very short wave radio system to cover distances of up to one thousand miles. And it is impossible to jam artificially this Message-by-Meteor system—now known as JANET.

When a favourable meteor trail occurs in the sky midway between the two stations, and in practice it is found that this happens several hundred times an hour, a continually broadcast signal from the receiving station reaches the transmitting station. Instantly this triggers off a tape recorder and the whole message is broadcast—many times speeded up—in less than a second, before the trail has a chance to diffuse. The receiving set records the burst of signals, and then plays it back slowed down to a normal speed.

Bouncing short-wave radio signals off meteor-trails must call for a Robin Hood standard of accuracy.

In 1955 a meteor hit the Earth tangentially and blazed from Scotland to Cornwall in 3 seconds before exploding at a height of 200 miles. Many people realised that it was a Thing from Outer Space; and far too many thought it was a flying saucer.

The IGY scientists, and the men who designed JANET, and all those studying meteor phenomena, did not share those illusions.



Amarcord



Another scan  
by  
cape1736

